

THE MIDNIGHT MOON AND OTHER STORIES

KISHORI CHARAN DAS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kishori Charan Das (b.1924) is a bilingual writer who writes short stories, poems, and essays, in Oriya and English, with a penchant for short stories. He belonged to the Indian Audit and Accounts Service which provided him with an opportunity of travelling extensively in India and abroad, with fairly long tenures in Calcutta, Delhi, Washington D.C., USA, and Swaziland in Southern Africa. Thus the events and characters in his short stories are drawn from a multi-cultural spectrum, carrying nevertheless, a similarity of middle-class concerns, values, hopes, and frustrations. He has so far published: *Oriya* (a) 13 collections of short stories, (b) 2 collections of essays, (c) 1 collection of poems, and *English* (a) 2 collections of short stories, and (b) 1 collection of poems. His short stories have been translated into English, French, Spanish, Arabic, and various Indian languages, and featured in several publications, including those brought out by Penguin Books, U.K., Sahitya Akademi, National Book Trust of India, Indian Council of Cultural Relations, Times of India and Vikas. He has received several awards and honours, the most important of which are: (a) Sahitya Akademi Award 1976, (b) Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award 1976, (c) Sarala Award 1986, (d) Bishuv Award 1992.

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To the memory of

Viswajita

dearly beloved daughter

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Kishori Charan Das

This "Introduction" is derived from an article written by the author and published in the 'Indian Literature' in its July-August 1986 number under the title "Shaping a Short Story".

There is no denying that whenever something happens in our workaday world, which may not necessarily be important but is a shade more than interesting, one is curious to know about what *really* happened to cause that happening. The assumption is that by and large there is always an interplay behind the scenes before the act is brought to the notice of the audience by accident or design. I too belong to the vulgar crowd that assumes thus and would like to gather the delectable 'knowledge', if I can. But is it fair and reasonable to insist that the truth of an event such as a murder, a divorce, or the sacking of a heavyweight minister would also apply to the non-event of a story, which is avowedly a story and no more? That is what a writer asks and has been asking for ages, since writing began. But alas, his enterprising readers, editors and interviewers, and even the learned critics are not in the habit of taking 'no' for an answer What is worse, some are happy to play the detective, and surprise the writer with a result, no matter if it shows him in a poor light, apart from being fanciful. This being so, and knowing how my betters, past and present, have fared in the encounter, could I possibly balk at writing this piece? However I must warn my readers that my inside stories may not be half as interesting as what I have caused to appear on the outside. And would they believe (and excuse me) if I add that these may not be even half as true!

I am not being facetious in making the last statement. I can tell you for sure that on a certain day or over a period of time a sequence of thoughts and events in the life of a roguish Rama and a sad Sita did occur to me as the raw material of a story that could deliver a satisfying climax. I am not unaware that quite often strange transformations took place in the processing of the raw material, so much so that Rama turned out to be noble after all, and Sita a pseudo, offering a climax more delightful than pathetic, as I would have imagined. I could very well consult my diary and tell you exactly when these alchemies occurred in my mind. These occurrences are facts; I can vouch for them. But could I tell you fully and truthfully that so-and-so were my Rama and Sita in real life and this is how

they actually behaved? What is more important (particularly in the eyes of the psychiatric critic), could I explain why such characters and events, including the twists and turns, occurred to me as they did and thus provide you with a glimpse of my mind that I have always found to be so charmingly elusive? I am afraid it is a tall order. I would not go as far as Masti Venkatesa Iyengar to say that "it is as tough as asking a woman to explain how she is shaping her baby in her womb". I consider myself more fortunate, for I suppose I have been favoured with a few sightings of the conceiving and the Foetal wonders, as I have gone along with my creations. But what I would submit is that I am incapable of revealing the process *fully and truthfully*, the external facts as well as the internal alchemies. I could further plead in my defense that my competence is not too relevant to your understanding and appreciation of my 'truths', but that is a different matter.

With these apologies, I wish to present my own understanding of how my stories came into being for whatever it is worth. Basically, I agree with William Faulkner that "a writer needs three things, experience, observation and imagination, and any two of which, at times any one of which, can supply the lack of others." However I must confess that while I have made use of these inputs given to me, the proportions between them have hardly been ideal, and I have been obliged to draw upon the resources of my imagination, and to a lesser degree of observation, a little too heavily for comfort. Couldn't the truths of my fiction be more effective, I have often wondered, if I had lived through them in terms of direct experience like Gopinath Mohanty among the adivasis of Koraput, not to speak of the inimitable George Orwell among the vagrants of London and Paris? Even the rural conditioning, evident in the works of most writers in Orissa, one of the least urbanized state in the country, has unfortunately been denied to me. A middle-class boy, perhaps more upper than middle, moving on from a small town to metropolitan cities, including capitals abroad, and tied to a cloistered civil service like Audit and Accounts does not inspire confidence as a writer—or does he? Some of my friends tell me, taking a cue from Adler that these 'inferiorities' of birth and circumstance have helped me to relate more to the universal human mind and reach greater depths of perception, by-passing the variousness of distracting visuals. Some others have said it's a pity that I have missed the variety, the 'riches of the world' etc. As for myself I can only say that I am sorry it had to be so, with the rider that I have tried to transcend my limitations not only by maximizing the inputs other than experience, but also by expanding the area of the experience as best as I could.

It is vastly surprising in this context that there are a few stories that occurred to me almost on a platter of experience. Thus, for example, I was

once travelling from Cuttack to Howrah by the Puri-Howrah Express, when it was rudely brought to a halt in the early morning by some local strikers at a small station named Mecheda. After an interminable period of waiting I beat it back to Kharagpur in a suburban train for rest and reprieve at the house of my niece, till I could resume my journey to Calcutta. I had thought it was a clever move. But in the bargain it turned out to be an unforgettable experience of being closetted with a horde of young commuters, students-cum-political workers, irrepressible thugs as you may call them, who suggested to me the theme and the title of the story 'The Hundred Sons', recalling the hundred spewed by Gandhari of the *Mahabharata*. The raucous chatter of these young ones, who could as well be my sons, exposing a shallow and amoral attitude to life, till they were driven to pull the alarm-chain in order to help a poor and lame fellow-student get on board, failing which they threw a hard-earned rupee at him for richshaw-hire so that he could get to his rural college in time were the facts I turned into fiction. Except for a slight twist that the rupee was borrowed from me, and returned unexpectedly by somebody at another stop, when my companions had already vanished and I had least hopes of recovering the miserable coin. This is one of my stories that has been translated and published in seven Indian and foreign languages and included in a Vikas anthology. Similarly there was this death of a fellow-Indian that occurred in Washington DC, when I was posted there, the elegant ritual with flashes of 'proper' sorrow, and the supposedly brave decision of the widow of staying back in the alien land. The basic facts, even the backdrop of a snowfall, are laid out truthfully in the title-story of my book *Death of an Indian*. What I have added is no more than a lovable exaggeration here and there, and a gentle raising of eyebrows over the shining dollar that peeps through the veneer of all that is proper and normal in our times. Then again, I had once the dubious privilege of riding into the storm of a 'matinee revolution' in Calcutta in the late sixties. I had shared the defiance of my senior colleague in the Calcutta Corporation, of getting into his battered Buick for a ride back home. No wonder our vehicle was stoned, there was some shooting by policemen with no damage done, and the two of us had to take a temporary refuge in the drawing-room of a charming lady, sister-in-law to my companion. These facts are essentially there in my story 'Red Evening' featured in Penguin's *New Writing in India*. But the colours and contours of the incident have been heightened, the evening sun has chimed in with a subliminal spilling of blood and my juxtaposition to the conservative old-timer of a companion has been transmuted into the heart-searching of a puny revolutionary thrown into the company of a heroic reactionary who has apparently won the day, apart from saving his life.

These are a few of my stories in which experience has played a major role, in the descending order, and apparently I owe little to observation or for that matter to imagination, except for cosmetic and dramatic effects. But pity, there are not many more of this kind. The vast majority of my stories are not 'revealing' as you and I would have wished. There are some rooted in a personal involvement which is so universal, howsoever intense, that I cannot possibly give it the status of an experience. Thus, for example, the death of my own child which forms the basis of my story 'The Dispossessed' and tells you how the sorrows of the young mother must yield to machinations of Father Time. Again, there was the death of a close relative by suicide for love. There is really nothing to write home about this tragic exercise in human folly that overtakes the very young every other day. But it helped me to write the story 'Nishap' in which I have sought to bring out a certain profile in desperate love, so the girl does not have to follow her lover in death. And the cruellest irony I had to perpetrate is that a friend of the boy who had set out to avenge his death falls for the *femme fatale* himself! There are numerous other stories in which experience of any kind is absent, and I have tried, as it were, to make a collage come alive—interesting slices of characters, bits of absorbing atmosphere, hints of incidents, and tons and tons of imagination bound together in a story that presumes to be true. Thus, the infernal barking of dogs that caused me to swear through many sleepless nights in a certain locality in Calcutta gave me the story of 'Dogs of the Night' (published in French translation in *Europe* from Paris), in which I have likened the uncommitted intellectual *bhadralog* of the city to a mangy bitch that must die in the crossfire of a fight between the males, the Naxals and th Congsals. The overpowering emotion that seized me at the sight of the valley of hills in Darjeeling gave me the story of a young unwed couple who failed to consummate their much-awaited love in such a grand and awesome setting. The exotica of Swaziland, a beautiful country in Southern Africa where I had spent two years as an International Expert impelled me to write the story "A Saucer of Milk", one of the few stories I have written originally in English. But I could not have done much about it but for the thematic core provided by the vastly interesting complex of Experts from various countries gathered under one roof, and their competing egos on display. I thought I could see through it all, and sense a pitiful disorientation in the emotional content of their lives in an alien atmosphere. And when a little girl arrived on the scene (could be the daughter of any of us), well, she was the heaven-sent catalyst given unto me to set the story on its course! So here you have a heady mix of observation with a dash of personal experience, wedded to an abiding world-view on the essential loneliness of the so-called intellectual, and in a special background of my choosing for the added effect. I suppose I do

not have a better example of a collage come alive in my scheme of fiction-writing. Then there ar the stories like "The Broken Taj" where the protagonist is a small girl, "The Visitor" where she is a young woman newly married, and "The Midnight Moon" where she is a middle-aged housewife, in which the "sufferers" have their own distinct ways of looking at the unfairness of things in a world they have been asked to inhabit, but not allowed to shape according to their heart's desire. I cannot surely claim to have had the experience, as such, of their feminine worlds, young or adult; my observations, based as they are on certain models, have not always been direct; but I must pay handsome tributes to my imagination working on a broad canvas of observations shaped in a certain way over the years, which have endeared these troubled characters to my readers. Finally, there are stories such as 'Godless' (featured in ICCR's *Modern Indian Short Stories*, Vol. IV) of a man having to choose, for no ostensible reason, between the death of two children, his son and the daughter of a dear friend, to which I have found no clue yet in any bit of experience or observation. So much for the vaunted creative process!

So I have come to realize for myself that in the final analysis what matters most is not the so-called inputs, but the world-view of a writer, derived from the totality of his experience. My own happens to be a world that is fascinating, peopled by characters given to flashes of illumination in situations of conflict that lead to nowhere. Climaxes that do not clinch the issue, but are meant to be satisfying nonetheless, opening out to horizons that might be reached some day. It is this unholy perception that has helped me to the crucial twists and turns, the alchemies that have yielded the 'gold' of my stories, well beyond what I recall having seen and heard and felt in any given instance.

To elaborate: My imagination coloured by the world view is but the means of telling you what I consider as real. That is how I am not only allergic to happy endings as most modern writers are, I am no less averse to unrelieved and desperate sorrows. I yield to none in my appreciation of social injustice, but I have always felt that the way it is practised is so common-place, subtle and based on the self-deceiving condition of the human mind that the best I can do is to attempt a curious mix of sarcasm and sympathy that may pass for understanding. My truths are not black-and-white but not gray either as Andre Gide would say, for they offer me a constantly changing pattern of vibgyor, amusing in lighter vein, but both terrible and beautiful when I cannot help being serious.

It is a sad fact that as I have grown in years, I am increasingly oppressed by the syndrome of seriousness. The intenser aspect, if you will. The god-like stance of amused and benign indifference seems to have taken me to a dead end, and I wish I could apprehend the total reality in a leap. That

is, forget my dear ironies and seize God for his Truths, as it were, here and now. I do not know what D.H. Lawrence meant by saying that one has to be so terribly religious to become an artist. But I can sense his deadly ambition and anguish. However, no one need tell me that I have to settle for the anguish sans ambition for the rest of my life, ever incomplete and unhappy as a mere writer, or else.



1 THE BROKEN TAJ

The Oriya original "Bhanga Khelana" is the title-story of the author's first Oriya collection "Bhanga Khelana", published in 1961. It also stands included in "Oriya Galpa Mala", anthology published by the National Book Trust of India in Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, Kannada, Gujarati and Urdu, and is due to be published in other Indian languages.

The English version is a translation of the Oriya original by Sri K.K. Mohapatra and Sri Leelawati Mohapatra, and was published under the title "A Present for Mummy" in "Indian Literature", bi-monthly journal of the Sahitya Akademi (No. 106, March-April 1985). It is also included in the English collection "Wild Peacock and other stories", published by "Grassroots", Bhubaneswar.

A strip of sunlight sleeps on the garden, stretching up to the row of marigolds. A part of the flowerbed in sunlight, a part in shadow. Some flowers basking in the sun, the others—poor dears!— trembling away in the cold. A butterfly's settling on a flower in the sun—will it or will it not go to the other side? Why, it's gliding away now. Oh no, it's come back again, the naughty thing! The flower this side is all smiles again, it's opened up its petals in a broad grin. The flower on the other side is so sad; it's drooping, clammed up in the cold. Nothing will revive it; it'll never grow warm any more even if you held it, only your fingers grow numb.

Peanut-shells crackled underfoot. Gita swept them down the veranda with her feet, they fell into the half-dead cluster of yellow chrysanthemum bushes. Ten-year-old Gita was sitting out on an afternoon of her Christmas holidays in the backyard of her house, playing hide-and-seek of thoughts in the nooks and corners of her mind.

There are those big flowers in our school garden, the big yellow flowers: Sunflowers. Kulia calls them Sun-watchers. It seems they're always mooning about the sun. Oh, that Kulia is a big liar all right.

The sunflower isn't beautiful at all, it's simply large-faced, that's all. Like Mrs. Ghosal. She cackles so loudly, does Mrs. Ghosal. Her protruding teeth look so menacing and the large buttons on her long, shabby coat so hideous. How she thumps the table with her plump yellow palms and screams, 'There there, stop talking!'

The tutor hasn't turned up. Good, Mummy's fast asleep. She looks sweet. But she flies into such terrible tempers these days. She looks lovely when she smiles, but, frankly, perfectly ghastly when she is angry. These days, God knows what has happened, she's picking on me for no reason at

all. For instance, yesterday Raju tore up my picture-book and broke all my colour pencils. But when I hit him, the fault, mind you, was mine. Mummy spanked both of us and screamed and screamed: 'Oh, I wish you could die, both of you . . .' She's howling for nothing these days.

She doesn't spare poor Kulia either. The other day she got so mad with him that she pushed away a glass of milk, and the glass broke. Had it been one of us . . . well! well!

The sunlight's quietly crept up to the canna plant. What a funny plant, this canna here. Only large long leaves, no flowers. Such lovely flowers bloom in our school garden—red, yellow, yellow speckled with red. How poor Sobha got it the other day for plucking a flower! Mummy's stopped taking care of our garden these days, the only thing she does is to take it out on the poor gardener.

It feels kind of cold. The puppy's a regular little blockhead, why is it rolling on the grass? Doesn't it feel cold? Let the ugly black dog of the neighbours come along, this one will tuck its tail between its legs and promptly break into a sprint, the little rogue.

My, what a butterfly! Why, it's a regular little dandy. Look at its colour. Yellow with shining black strips. Like a ripe yellow banana skin with dark lines. Let's catch it. Oh no! It's gone now, gone away to the neighbour's garden. How sweetly did it flutter its tiny wings. The puppy's wagging its tail like that—one, two, three. . .

It flew to their garden, didn't it? But where has it vanished now? See, their daddy is back home. He's so nice, he's cuddling his little son. He always returns from office early. But our daddy? — he never returns before night.

Oh, how sweet, he's drooling over his little son and showing him some birds. What's his son's name, let's see—Thunu? I wish we had a small thing like him. Raju and Biju would be straightened out overnight; besides, mum would fuss over the little one and forget to get angry.

Of course, our daddy is fond of us all. But somehow Raju and Biju corner more of his attention. Never mind. I suppose I've become too big to be fussed over now. Basanti is such an awful braggart, she says her daddy buries her with kisses, once in the morning, once in the evening, and as many times as possible in between. As if the fellow has nothing better to do. Basanti is insufferable.

But these days, God knows what's got into our daddy, he isn't being affectionate anymore. For one thing, he comes home so late. Then he sits on the cot like a sack, all very grim. 'Don't bother me,' he snarls if you tell him any little thing. 'Why don't you kids go out and play?' If mummy

asks, 'Shall I get you something to eat?', he replies, 'No, not necessary.' Slowly, mincing the words, without a smile, without feeling.

What's happened to him? He wasn't like this before. Those days, when we were in Puri, he always came home so early. Mum would bustle about in the kitchen, frying *purees* and potatoes. Daddy would pick me up and kiss me. Then he'd go and embrace mummy. Mummy'd grumble, he'd giggle. Like a boy.

Has daddy become old by any chance? But his teeth haven't fallen, nor has his hair turned grey. I can believe Roma's grandfather is old, because his hair is absolutely silver grey. Oh, he laughs so much, that old boy. And he's so loving. Always stuffing us with sweets and teaching us songs.

Those days daddy used to sing so much. Anything from hymns to film songs, in Hindi, in Oriya. . . *Raghupati Raghav Rajaram. . . Dedi hame azadi bina. . .*

Gita hummed, tapping her feet. Then she stopped abruptly. Her small face crumpled and she looked ready to burst into tears.

Sometimes daddy cries. Perhaps he will never sing again. He's getting old, maybe.

The other day I woke up in the middle of the night from a nightmare and found the lights were on. Daddy was wide awake, staring at the ceiling. He looked like a stranger, not like our daddy, so unfamiliar did he seem. Maybe he wasn't crying then, but I was afraid he might any moment. 'Daddy,' I called out. He started. 'Why're you bawling?' he said, in irritation. 'Go back to sleep.' This kind of a person couldn't be our daddy. What's the matter with him, anyway?

Tring. . . tring. . .tring. . . Oh God, has the tutor arrived or what? No, it's the breadwallah. Anyhow, this can wake up mum.

Bhein. . . n . . . n. . . Biju's woken up and set up a bawling. Now this surely will wake up mummy. And once she gets up, she will take it out on me the very first thing.

'Gita! Hey Gita!' Gita's mother called out. 'Oh, where has that girl gone? No studies, no nothing, that chit of a dame must be sitting somewhere like a gossipy old hag!

'Coming, mummy!' Gita replied.

Well, what did I tell you?

II

'Like the whirlpools
Revolves the game of circles

Round and round and round,
Lots of fun, yessir,
In our uncle's place
Until hit by uncle the hound. . .'

'Hey Raju, let go my hand,' said Gita. 'Why don't you skip faster? Puni, hold my hand properly. Listen, let's play School, all right? All of you sing along with me: Ring-a ring-a roses. . . Pocketful of posies. . .'

Raju, Biju and the neighbour's girl Puni started singing with her. 'Ling-a-ling-a loses,' sang little Biju, the youngest of all. The late morning sun shone through the flimsy clouds.

'. . . All fell down'.

They slumped to the ground with a thud. Gita glanced around: a small drain by the side of Pradhan's backyard on the right; the meadow in front, with clumps of bushes and stones; the termite-hill at the end of the meadow; far away from everything, her daddy's office, a dull reddish affair; the raw sunlight, breaking in through the clouds, lighting up things at random.

Those stones near the drain aren't actually stones. Diamonds. If only they could be cut and polished, they'd make a lovely necklace. The teacher says diamonds are the most precious and glittering of all stones, they shine in the dark. How happy will mum be to have one of them. She'll call everyone and announce proudly, look at what my Gita has given me.

Who are these people coming towards us? Oh, Babua and Bonudada. Babua is wearing a green pullover and twirling a stick. Now that fatso, that pampered devil, will go on a rampage here. He'll insist on playing that abominable game of his: 'Deaf and blind, if I hit don't fault-find'. He will whirl around like a dervish, hitting everyone in sight. If anyone cries out in pain, the wretch will go scuttling to his father and hide behind him like an innocent baby. A regular little sissy—yessir, that's what he is—tied to his daddy's coat-tails. When it comes to studies the hero flunks, but who can beat him in showing off?

And Bonudada, his father, beside him—fair, slim, handsome, always smiling. 'Nuabou,' he always calls out to mummy, barging into our house. 'Give something to eat, we're famished.' Mummy would grin and fish out something from the almirah.

Bonudada's so fair and handsome. But why is Babua such an ugly dumpling? Actually he's like his mother, although not as fat. His mother never stirs out of the house. All the time she sits before the mirror, combing her hair. It seems she even bathes thrice daily.

'Hello, Gita,' greeted Bonudada. 'Is your mummy home?'

'Attention!' roared Babua, striking the ground heavily with his stick.

'Yes, Bonudada,' smiled Gita.'But why hasn't Babua gone to school today?'

'No, no, no,' whimpered Babua. 'Daddy himself has stopped me from going to school. Daddy, see how Gita is after me.'

Bonudada smiled, patted them and headed for the house. The children resumed their games under Babua's leadership. No games, only running amuck all over the place and shouting away to glory. What chaos, Gita sneered. She was left alone, perhaps she wanted to keep away from the bedlam.

Mummy and Bonudada are walking in the garden at the back. Bonudada's laughter can be heard from here. He laughs a lot, does Bonudada. The garden is bursting with flowers and tomatoes and brinjals. The brinjals have grown particularly well. The smooth, shiny brinjals—daddy simply adores them. But the other day, since the curry had turned out pretty awful, mummy wanted to know if he'd like some fried brinjals. But daddy said, no, not necessary. Not in anger, true, but with lead in his voice. Mum was hushed.

Where's daddy? Where has he gone off in the morning? Office? What office on holidays, let me hear!

Anyway, it's good he isn't around. Had he been here, he and Bonudada would have sat in the drawing-room discussing the office and news. No laughter, no fun, no nothing, only sitting with long faces and mumbling a word or two now and then. Tell me, what kind of get-together is this? It reminds me of our school committee meetings in the headmaster's room. I've seen the committee members sitting grimly around the table, poring over something for hours on end. The students are told not to raise their voices or walk past that room, because the meeting is on if you please!

If dad is home when Bonudada comes, mummy comes out before them only once to serve Bonudada some snacks. Daddy doesn't smile, nor do Bonudada and mummy. Sometimes daddy does ask her to sit a minute with them, but she always mumbles she's got work and hurries away.

One day Bonudada laughed over something he had said. Mummy joined him. Daddy watched them for a long time and smiled very reluctantly. I wonder what's eating him.

It's good daddy isn't around. So, no mournful meeting in the dingy drawing-room today. They're twittering away happily, Bonudada and mummy, out in the sunlit garden. He's laughing, she's giggling.

Mummy's going to be in a fine mood today. She might not get angry the whole day. Perhaps she'll comb my hair this afternoon and nicely tie a ribbon. Sometimes, God knows what happens to her, she becomes so

distracted that she takes almost an hour to do up my hair. She just stops combing and stares into God knows where.

This morning mummy was so snappy she said, from today you people will have flattened rice with banana for breakfast, do you hear, where is the money to gorge you with all the delicacies? But now that Bonudada has come there might be some goodies. This may be *mohunbhog* or *pakora.*

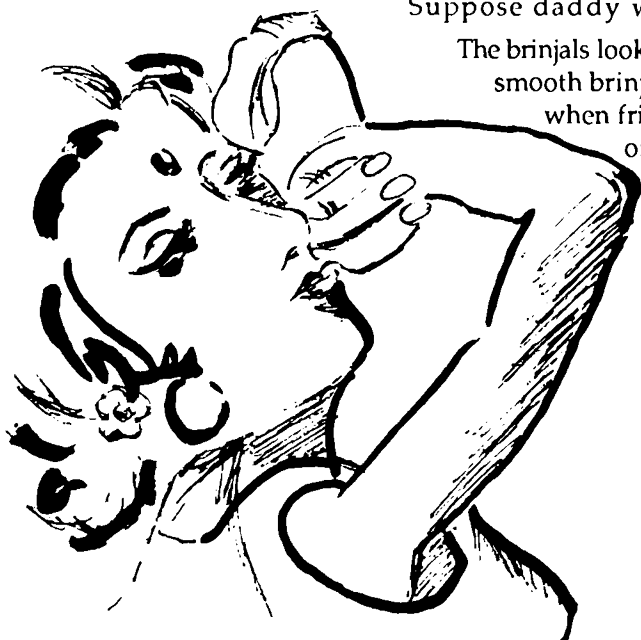
Gita leaned against the corner of the veranda from where a sizeable chunk of the backyard came into view.

Mummy's picking chilies. Bonudada's standing close to her. He's smiling, isn't he? Now mummy's raising her head and telling him something. Bonudada is in splits. Mummy's beaming and walking away from him.

Oh, look at these clacking ducks. God, where are they let loose from? They're waddling along so fast. Yellow beaks and legs. An old woman's chasing them.

A pair of ducks. Waddling together, clacking simultaneously— oh how sweet! Brother and sister? No. Father and mother. Father and mother? Unh—then? Bonudada and mummy? No, no. . . *chi!*

The sun's falling across mummy's face, her earring is dazzling. The vermilion on her head is burning, she's laughing. Suppose daddy were here now. . . .!



The brinjals look marvellous. Dark and smooth brinjals, they taste so crisp when fried. That day mummy offered to fry some, but daddy didn't want. But offer them to Bonudada, he'll be thrilled. That makes mummy so happy. What is she going to serve Bonudada today?

'Of course I'll come,' said Bonudada. 'How can I miss your birthday?'

Gita's mother smiled and shook her head.'Aha, as if you come running everytime I call you!'

'Don't I?' Bonudada looked at her.

Daddy does not talk like this. What's happened to him? If he's sick, why doesn't he show himself to a doctor and get okay?



. . . A car sped through the morning mist. The crows perched sullenly on the telephone wires. Tiny Biju lay in mummy's lap. Mummy thrust a *laddu* into daddy's mouth. He shook his head, ate half of it and put the rest into her mouth, dropping the crumbs all over the place. They giggled. 'Do you realise,' mummy scolded him with love, 'that the driver has a mirror in

front?' All this happened to other day, not too long ago, as we took the car to the station to pick up Bonudada. He was coming over here for the first time. Suppose he hadn't come. . .!

Lord, what a rumpus! Babua's shouting, Raju's howling. Pity, it will bring mummy here. And her temper will rise.

Gita ran to them. 'Don't you bring down the place, Babua, she pleaded. 'There, Raju dear, stop. crying,' Babua started pummelling her. She caught hold of him and hit back. Just then her mother and Bonudada reached them. Her mother glared at her. Bonudada kept smiling.

'Why did you hit, Babua?' her mother asked.

'I didn't,' Gita replied.'He started beating Raju, I simply stopped him.'

'Daddy,' said Babua, 'she's telling lies. She hit me. Ask Raju.'

Raju nodded, Gita's mother pulled Gita's ear.

'Mummy, I didn't do anything, Gita protested. 'They were shouting so loudly that you would have got annoyed. I wanted to hush them.'

'Shut up. Don't I know what a fat lot you care for your mother. Such a brood, they won't let a person be in peace even for two minutes. This Gita is the most annoying of all'.

Gita cried silently, the tears trickled down her cheek. And though the hazy film of tears she watched her mummy and Bonudada walk away.

But I didn't do any thing. I simply wanted to stop them from making such a racket, lest it disturbed mummy and spoiled her happiness.

No, she doesn't understand me. No longer. Oh, how did that Bonudada keep on grinning! That alone was enough to get anyone's goat.

Imagine a running train with large wheels and jets of black smoke and all that. Will Bonudada sport his silly grin if he has to lie under the train?

III

The dusk was falling. On her way from the school, Gita occasionally broke into a run. Kulia, who carried her school bag, lagged behind.

Today Niradidi said Gita's a good girl. Of course she is, isn't she? She's secured ten out of ten in Maths and eight out of ten in English, besides coming out first in Drawing. Niradidi said, My dear, if you continue like this you'll easily come first in the annual exam too. Oh, how did that Sumitra girl glower at me! Perhaps she was incensed that I might waltz away with the first prize this time.

Mummy will be so thrilled when I tell her. She'll bury me with kisses. And today's her birthday. She might give me a little present out of happiness. Maybe a piece of ribbon, or a bunch of pencils.

But I've brought her a present. It cost me full one rupee. I had saved this amount over the days. I don't think anyone else will bring her such a present. What can Raju get? He'll hand out a piece of rubber or silver paper and say, here's my present. And he's sure to want it back after a day or two, and if it's not returned to him right away, he will roll in the dust. That's Raju for you, the little man has no sense.

Will anyone bring a better present than mine? What will daddy get? Of course his will be something nice. Mummy will keep our presents side by side on the same shelf and say, there you are, look at the presents of the father and daughter!

And Bonudada—will he bring something? But why should he? What is he to mummy, after all?

Never mind, let him bring a present, how does it matter? Maybe, it will make mummy happier. Will she be happier with his present than with ours?

That mean lump of a Nina is dying with jealousy. Oh, why did I stop to talk with that ill-omen? It was stupid of me to discuss my present. She wanted to see it, but when I refused, she turned up her nose and had the cheek to say, my, we don't have such newfangled customs in our house, our daddy has no patience with such affections. The mean thing, the country bumpkin, she pretends she's a gem. Her classmate Suryamukhi was telling she gets caned very frequently and she howls like a hyena. She must be getting slapped at home, too. Don't tell me her parents don't spank such a yokel.

Does mummy hit me too much? No, only recently she's taken to it. Of course poor Raju gets it worse than me.

It's mummy's birthday today. She must be very happy. My present will make her happier. They say people remain happy the whole year if they're happy on their birthdays. It's possible mummy will not be nasty any more.

Whew, here's the milestone. Then comes the termite hill, where the queen termite has built her mud castle. Then the wall of the football field, loud with posters. In one of those posters I once saw Nargis wearing an old-fashioned nose-stud. Mummy said our grandma had one like that. Then—then—our h-o-u-s-e!

The lights are on. But there seems to be no one out in the porch—surprising! Perhaps mummy is inside. Daddy doesn't seem to have

returned from office. But where are Raju and Biju—gone out to play somewhere? They are having a gala time till now. Let Raju begin his school from next year, his happiness will be gone.

It's getting dark. The cinema posters are no longer visible. There's that tiny stream by the side of the wall; it looks eerie all right. Shall I go near it? No. The other day a big black bug was swimming about in the water. Maybe it's still at large and loose, or hiding somewhere in the tall grass. It could be an old witch in disguise for all you know, waiting to gobble up anyone that comes along her way, who knows!

It kind of feels chilly, doesn't it? Something seems to be happening to my hands—am I getting goose pimples or what? My, don't goose-pimples appear when one is scared?

Where's the present? Am I holding it or not?

Gita clasped the paper-packet tighter, slowing down as she neared the gate.

The lights are on. Outside it's dark. There's no one around. The flowers have all gone to sleep.

The cook came and opened the door.

'Where's mummy?' Gita asked.

'Ma has gone to Mishrababu's house, the children are out playing, Babu hasn't returned from office'.

So mummy's not there. No one's there. Doesn't mummy remember today's her birthday? No, I suppose she'll be back soon. I'll tell her I've come out first in the class. But before she's back, let me instal my present in the middle room under the glare of light. She'll be thrilled when she notices it. It's lucky nobody's around.

Let me first take the packet to the drawing-room and unwrap it there. Then I'll bring it back to the middle room.

On her way, Gita stopped near the door opening to the backyard. It was wide ajar.

It's dark all around, more so around the trees. The darkness is eloquent, there are many voices. Not voices, but the whispers of the breeze. The trees are exchanging notes, maybe. A solitary light is burning in some faraway house. The first floor of the Chowdhurys looks so well lighted. Why doesn't the light tremble in the breeze?

My favourite photograph hangs from the wall. Mummy's holding me in her arms. Lord, she's not smiling. Why's she so grim suddenly?

The darkness is quivering in the breeze, it's whispering. But nothing is happening in the light. And mummy's there in the light, cold and aloof

like a pillar. The breeze doesn't reach her. I wish it could set her hair flying and her thin little lips trembling. She ought to burst out of her stony silence and giggle and talk. Even get angry.

What will happen if she really becomes dumb like this photograph? What if she stops even getting angry?

Look, the moon is up over the far corner of the police lines. What a moon, this jagged slice! Not even neatly cut into half by a knife, but plucked out roughly. But what is that pale ring around it, the mist?

Hello Moon-uncle! But why is it called uncle? Is he mummy's brother? Mummy has four brothers, this one is the fifth? Really an uncle? Uncle's face is round and fair. Like mummy's. Is he smiling, the Moon-uncle? No, the poor dear is sulking. He's lonely, there's no one around to give him company, not even a little star. Is he lonely like mum?

Gita went to the drawing room and started rummaging through her toys.

The bride and groom. Flanked by the little drummers and musicians. The bride's things include cot, almirah, table and sofa set. But what about a sewing machine and a radio? I must remember to ask mummy to buy me these two when I accompany her to the market.

Lord Mahadev is watching everything from the topmost shelf. One foot raised, he's holding his *damru. Bom. . . bom. . . bom*—the *damru* beats—*bom. . . bom. . .*

This present of mine—well, where do I keep it? On the toy-shelf in the drawing-room? Or in the almirah of the middle room, or on the dressing table in the bedroom?

Will mummy give it back to me later? Never mind. This is hers, she can do whatever she likes with it.

Let me take off the wrapper. Ready, one, two, three. . . Why, it's awful to be covered in such a dirty piece of paper. I asked that salesman chap for a nice-looking box, but the fellow wouldn't oblige.

Present! my present! A lotus. Lovely white shells arranged one after the other as petals, each fringed with a golden line. A tuft of yellow strands in the middle.

The salesman said I could have had a better lotus with gold-and-silver work for a little more money. Never mind, the one in hand is pretty enough.

Let me put it on the shelf. Near our Lord Mahadev. Then I'll switch off all the lights excepting the one in this room. The light should fall only on the Lord and the lotus.

Doesn't it look smart? Of course, it does. What do you have to say 'bout it, Mr Mahadev? Mum will enter the house through this room and notice it the first thing.

Holding the lotus, Gita groped her way to the middle room in the dark. She switched on the light, and the room was flooded with light.

What, the bed's not been made still? The washed clothes of the children are lying in a pile. God help Kulia, mum's going to make mincemeat of him.

Hey what's that—that dazzling wonder on the corner-shelf? It's made of stone or silver? It seems to be attracting all the light. How lovely and big! Who's brought this?

No, my hands don't reach it. Let me stand on the edge of the cot and try.

Putting down her present on the window-sill, Gita clambered onto the cot and stood on its edge.

Why, it looks even grander from near. What is it? A castle? A temple? No, wait, it must be that Taj Mahal. Yes, there's a picture of this in the history book. It says in the book it's made out of milk-white marble and is in Agra. Now let's see, who built this?.

Is this replica also made of pure marble or what? Yea, it must be, so smooth and nice it feels. How much do such things cost?

What's this small paper tucked under it? Something seems to have been scribbled on it in green ink. Let's see. 'To Nuabou on her birthday—Bonu.' So Bonudada has given this. His present to mummy, huh?

Kulia came in from behind.

'Gitadidi', he said,'don't touch it. Bonudada has put it there. Ma has not yet seen it.'

'Enough. I know that. And now you may go.

So Bonudada has given this present. A lovely thing, a pretty costly thing. Mum will be pleased. Why? Because it's costly and lovely, or because Bonudada has given it?

My present's on the window-still. In a dim corner. It's not even white, let alone shine. Frankly, if you ask me, it looks downright ugly.

Should I give it to her? What's the use? Look at the cute Taj Mahal and look at this mess of snail-shells. Mum will dump it in some cold corner and forget. Nobody will bother about it.

What if Bonudada's present gets broken or thrown away?

No, no, my present's also good and nice. Taj Mahals are the kind of presents that the elders give, my present is the kind that the kids give. Mum will be as happy with it as with Bonudada's present.

But will this eye-catching wonder remain here, or shall I remove it to the drawing-room? The Chowdhurys have kept all the things they got from Mysore in their drawing-room. We have also kept the things that Nandanbhai got for us from Bombay in the drawing-room. So in the fitness of things this present of Bonudada should also be kept there, it belongs there, it'll look good there.

And in its place let's keep the lotus. Mum's eyes will fall on it the moment she comes in.

Picking up the Taj Mahal carefully in one hand, Gita climbed down.

Oh no, no. . . Oh!

A thud, and the Taj Mahal broke into splinters. Gita stood aghast. There was abject fear in her eyes, as if the world had come to an end.

O God, what's happened? Oh, why did it happen?

A beautiful birthday present for mummy is broken. Bonudada's present is broken. This will break mummy's heart. Will it?

But I've also brought her a present. Oh, that wretched thing is still lying on the window-sill. Shall I break it and be done with it?

No, I haven't broken anything. I haven't done anything on purpose. I had no wish that Bonudada's present should break. I know mummy would have been happier to have Bonudada's present. I simply tried to put it in the drawing-room. I thought it'd look better there.

Mum will understand me. Will she? But why did I want to remove it to the drawing-room at all? Why was I dying to keep my present here?

No, I haven't done anything on purpose. I haven't broken Bonudada's present. It fell from my hand and broke. I didn't throw it on the floor. Mum loves me, surely she will understand.

But Bonudada's present is broken!

So what? It's not a present of mine, nor daddy's! Mum might not get angry at all. Maybe she'll be a little upset, that's all.

But why did I try to take it away from this place? Because I wanted mum to see my present before anyone else's, huh? Oh, why did I do it? Of course, Bonudada's present is better than mine. To mum, his present is more beautiful than mine.

It's time for them to return. Mummy will come back. Bonudada will come back. With that cocky smile of this, oh God! Daddy will come back. But he doesn't matter, does he?

Oh, why did I do it?

Gita covered her face and slumped down. The scalding tears drenched her fingers.

IV

I can hear the squeak of shoes. Who's come? Thank God, it's not Bonudada. It's daddy.

Gita's father enters the room and surveys the mess, his face clouded and care-worn as ever.

'What's broken here?'

Gita does not reply.

'I'm asking what's broken here'.

'A present, daddy. Bonudada had got it for mummy.

Why does daddy clam up? Is he thinking of something? Why he's walking off without another word.

Her face brightens in spite of the tears. She seems to see a ray of hope.

Daddy's walking off. Should I ask? Should I?

'Daddy! Daddy!'

'What?'

She runs to her father.

'Daddy, have you got a present for mummy?'

2 COLD WAVES

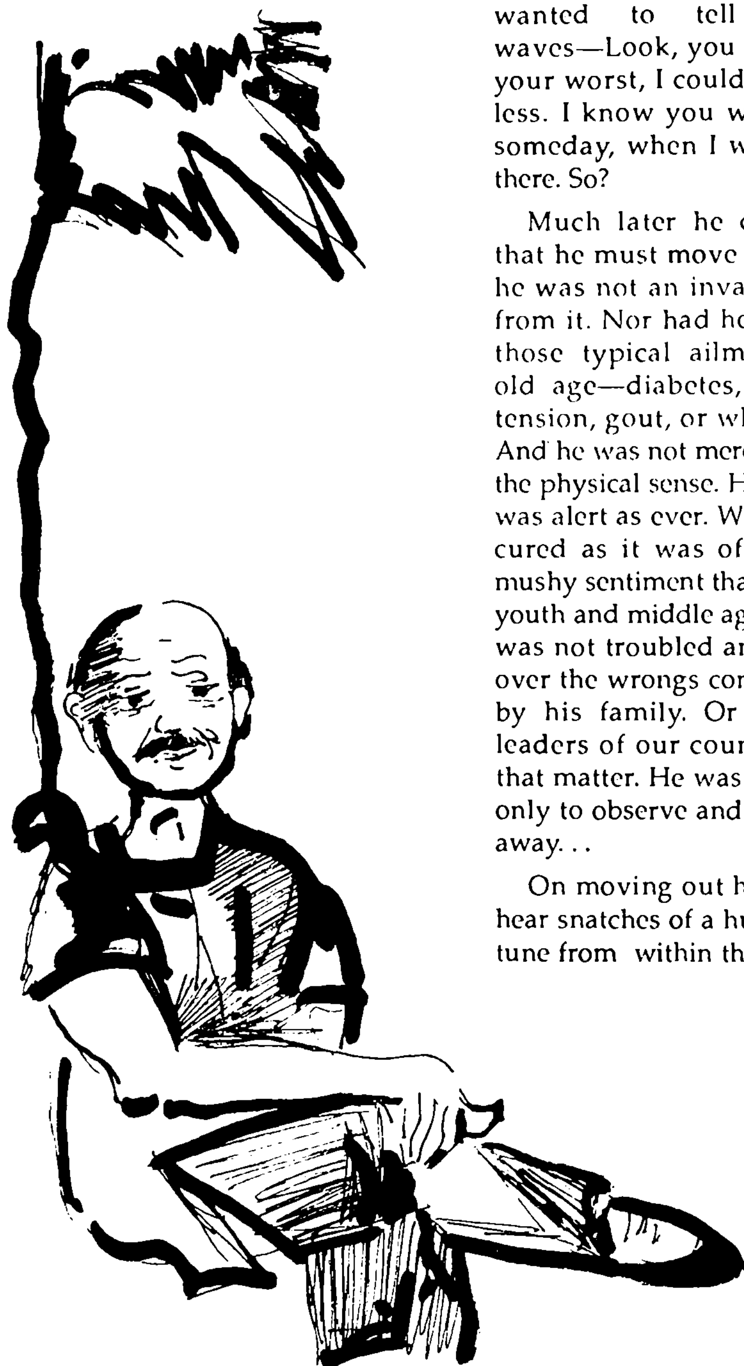
The Oriya original "Shita Lahari" is the title-story of the author's 10th collection "Shita Lahari", published in 1986.

The English version is a translation made by the author and was published in "Indian Literature", journal of the Sahitya Akademi (No. 125, May-June 1988).

You can't have a glimpse of the sea from within the house, from any angle whatsoever. But you are bound to hear the constant roar of the waves. And that is what irritates Kartick Babu, more so when there is no other sound now to claim his attention in this house. There is no mother-of-Rangia, the maidservant who would love to have a verbal showdown with the manservant Raghua at the earliest opportunity. Mother-of-Rangia is dead. Raghua is now attached to the elder son, moving around the world on some export-import business. No furious cackle of hens chased by a mischievous boy. For that boy, the younger son, is now a cardiologist sitting pretty at Calcutta. No monkeys chattering on the guava tree. (Even the damned monkeys are dead or what?) And there is no Sarita. The one who had induced me to buy this house. Had fed me on hopes of a retired life, the two of us together, by the side of the sea, listening to the song of the waves. Song, my foot! She made it fast to the upper regions. While I am left listening to this—the stupid sound that goes on and on...

The young men of today are such oddballs, really. Our Ramu, a strapping lad of twenty—does he ever come out of his den? Reading comics and ogling at the semi-nude pictures of girls in film magazines is all that occupies him on a vacation. And when I ask him to do something, he just smiles sheepishly and says— I am getting bored! But, pray tell me, why? Couldn't you talk about things with your grandpa? About the wide world you have travelled with your father, the many places you have seen, strange sights and sounds, and what have you? You could also ask your grandpa to take you somewhere in this pilgrim town, that I know so well. At least for a stroll on the beach, where we can do better than merely listen to the waves, and may as well have some fun with them. You could perhaps get inside them and then come out on top, and laugh and play, while I do the clapping. But no, you would do nothing of the sort. For you are a sissy! mama's boy!

But Kartick Babu was not inclined to remove himself from his thoughts or the easy-chair. As if he had laid himself knowingly on the block. And



wanted to tell them waves—Look, you may do your worst, I couldn't care less. I know you will stop someday, when I won't be there. So?

Much later he decided that he must move out, for he was not an invalid. Far from it. Nor had he any of those typical ailments of old age—diabetes, hypertension, gout, or whatever. And he was not merely fit in the physical sense. His mind was alert as ever. Wiser too, cured as it was of all the mushy sentiment that affects youth and middle age. So he was not troubled any more over the wrongs committed by his family. Or by the leaders of our country, for that matter. He was obliged only to observe and smile it away. . .

On moving out he could hear snatches of a humming tune from within the closed

doors of Ramu's room. And he spoke to him inwardly—My dear fellow! Couldn't you clear your throat and sing a song like normal people? I mean, if you are really enjoying yourself.

Kartick Babu found the sky a little too gray, and the air a little too damp, when he stepped out of his house. Was the climate of Puri like this when I bought the house?—he wondered. He felt a little shivering too. But he didn't admit to the need of a shawl or something to wrap around his body.

He had no distinct plans of going anywhere. Told himself that walking on and on with firm steps was all that mattered. However, in a moment he thought he might as well go to the dirty-yellow house a few paces away. The house was rented by an old man, father to a numerous brood, whom he had met at the beach. . . The fellow had tried to fraternize with me, as if I was no less old, and hence his natural ally (in fact I am much older, but that does not show) and we could exchange information on our respective flatulence, coughs and colds and what you will. Fool! I would show him that the years don't make you old, but how you feel about yourself.

But he had hardly expected such overwhelming hospitality at the dirty-yellow house. Sadanand Babu, the head of the family, was effusive with his words and gestures of welcome, short of an embrace, and launched on a long recital of the reasons for which he had chosen Puri for his initial stay after retirement. Pity, his wife was not improving fast enough in her health, but his children, many of them now on vacation, were happy to be here. And he won't be feeling lonely any more, now that God had granted him such a good neighbour. Etc. Kartick Babu could not possibly respond to his ingratiating manners, which he ascribed to the lowly status of the host, that of a retired revenue assistant. But he did not feel it necessary to tell him that he was a retired Head of the Department. And he could not ignore the atmosphere he was presented with—of joy unbounded. The way the boys were laughing and chattering and chasing each other round the ramshackle sofa. Above all, the way a girl, hardly out of her teens, was lording above it all. Smiling like a queen and breaking out suddenly into a rippling laughter, and then changing over to a demure and serious pose for asking a question such as—'Papa, do waves grow bigger when the tide comes and smaller when it leaves?" As if she was indeed a queen and could choose and change her moods at will ! Kartick Babu could not but watch her bemusedly and comment to himself—here was another sample of the new generation, lovable of sorts, but incredibly foolish. And suddenly he felt like pulling her to his side and then treat her to a tiny little slap. . . or may be a quickie kiss on her rounded cheeks. . .

On his way back home Kartick Babu felt that it was a shame, a crying shame that Ramu was different. Couldn't he go over and be friends with

these people? At least the girl would have welcomed some company and fun.

Kartick Babu did an unusual piece of work that afternoon. He delved deep into the old papers of his young days lying in rusted steel trunks in the "storage room" and unearthed a stamp album. And he brought it almost furtively to his bed-room for a long leisurely look... Ah! they are all here. Russia of the Czars, Germany before Hitler, and Latvia and Tanganyka, states that you do not find on the map any more. My know-all ones did not show any interest in this precious collection. But there would be other children. For sure she would understand and welcome it, that wide-eyed girl.

The wide-eyed girl who belonged to the dirty-yellow house did more than welcome the gift. She did such a joyous little dance that made Kartick Babu wonder if this was what they meant by bubbling youth, and he had missed it somehow.

Which made him keep up the visits to his neighbour. And delve deeper and for longer hours into the trunks of the storage room for similar treasure... How about this one, the brass snuff-box shaped like a frog? Or should I bring out that toy-hookah? She may not have seen anything like it in today's homes. Or may be that marble elephant... Finally he settled for one, to start with, out of mischief (so he thought)—a childish drawing of palm trees and houses and sunset presented to him many years ago by Ramu. He imagined that Ramu and that girl would fight over it someday, when he saw it in her hands. And such fights were known to generate other feelings. Kartick Babu chuckled over the possibility, even as he told himself that it was an idle thought, for his Ramu was totally useless.

Anyway he was glad to notice that this one made her chuckle too. In fact all the gifts he plied her with on his successive visits were not merely accepted with thanks, but received with evident pleasure, variously displayed. Kartick Babu marvelled every time at her historionic talents. And he thought it would be wrong to dismiss her questions as trite. Look at the questions she has been asking me about the stamps—Uncle, why should there be just five stars in the stamps, not more nor less? Which made us talk about political history and then about the wonders of the solar system. Similarly her question about Kangaroos. Do the whites eat them too? She asked. Shouldn't they worship them as special animals, like our holy cows? That made us talk about religion, superstition, social ecology, and what have you. And how intently would she keep listening to me, as if I was her class teacher!

However Kartick Babu couldn't go there too often, as he would have wished. Because the return visits from Sadanand Babu were not adequate.

After all, there is a certain protocol among neighbours, he reasoned, even if one ignores the difference in status. Of course the girl has been coming here once in a while and has been asking all sorts of funny questions. And she has been telling me that her mother is not too well. So I might as well drop in for a minute. But why can't Ramu act normal and visit them?. . . The debate would have continued thus, but not perhaps for long, when it was rudely terminated on one sultry evening by the seaside.

He was at his usual spot, a little removed from the BNR hotel, fairly secluded for serious thought. There were no hawkers here, no empty chatter of tourists, and no ungainly sight of old people behaving like kids. Yes, it got a little too cold and lonely over here when the shadows lengthened, but he sought to ignore it. So he was taken somewhat by surprise, when he saw two young people in the distance sitting side by side, and watching the waves, like as if they were lovers and wanted no less to escape from the crowd. It was not an unpleasant surprise, for he was happy to note that there was some romance yet, in the present day world of Philistines.

Till he could see them at close range, when they were walking back. The faces were not clearly visible, but the gestures were familiar. Jeans over a thin pair of legs. . . the slouch. . . and then the way the girl laughed, like as if she was ringing a bell or something.

There could be no mistake now. It was Ramu. And the girl was no other than Malini, the girl from the dirty-yellow house!



Kartick Babu laughed. The silly fools! Why couldn't you be frank and open about it? Peeping in at odd hours to ask questions about stamps. Stamps indeed! And that Ramu telling me that there was no point in going right now to Delhi to attend coaching classes for the competitive exams, as one must do some private studies first. But how could I be taken in by such sham? Am I getting senile or what? Nonsense! Kartick Babu told himself that he was unused to the devious ways of the young people of today, that's why.

But he was not getting angry, he wished to assure the two of them. . . I am hurt, yes, because you did not play fair with me. But I am not going to stand in the way of your happiness. I am not that kind of man.

He withdrew himself completely from the dirty-yellow house. Not from the beach though. I don't want to encourage that old man, he said, in his game of marrying his daughter into my family. But there is no reason why I should not be myself.

So he found them almost every evening at the beach. And pitied them. For he had a feeling, he felt it in his bones, that it won't last. There was a false note somewhere in the improbable romance. Notwithstanding the full-throated songs sung by Ramu these days. And the increasingly pert (and stupider) questions asked by the girl on her rare visits to his study room.

He missed seeing them for quite a few days on the beach. He did not think they had seen him too and were avoiding him. For he had been careful enough to keep himself at a sufficient distance since that evening—the shadows and silhouettes were enough for his understanding. So what could have happened? He was beginning to feel that his premonitions were coming true.

He was confirmed in his feelings when Sadanand Babu came to inform him regretfully, that he was leaving the place with his entire brood for urgent family reasons. Day after tomorrow.

And then came that final evening, the next day, when Kartick Babu found Ramu all alone on the beach with his sorrows. There could be no doubt about the sorrows, the way he was throwing pebbles and things at the sea, getting up all of a sudden and pacing up and down the stretch, etc.—the typical gestures of a heart-broken (or may be jilted) lover.

His heart reached out to him. For once he felt a strangely satisfying communion with his grandson. He wanted to tell him that all these evenings, of the young and old alike, carry the same sadness and one has to get over them. For life has to be lived. And Malini was after all, not the most desirable girl left in the world. . . lively she may be, but terribly shallow, if you ask me. . .

He was determined to break all barriers and tell him tonight about these things and more, concerning life and love.

But he was totally confused (before it hit him) to hear the first words from Ramu when he reached home—

"Grandpa, do you have the stamps of Honduras with you? They are supposed to be among the most colourful , no?"

Kartick Babu looked at the face of his grandson. It was so guileless. But not so the waves. He could see them better, the shameless ones, grinning at him.

3 THE PRAYER ROOM

The Oriya Original "Thakura Ghara" is the title-story of the author's 5th collection "Thakura Ghara", published in 1975, which received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976. It has been rendered into a short tele-film by Doordarshan, Cuttack station.

The English version is a translation made by the author, and has not been published so far.

I

It was the cross-roads between life and death.

Sunanda Devi was critically ill. Except for her husband who was in the other world, the house was full of her kindred ones—daughter, son and grandchildren. Only Amar was not there. He was serving at a distant place in an important post. But he had also informed that he would be coming by plane, tomorrow along with his wife who was detained on account of a variety show she had to organise for flood relief. The younger son Bhramar was living at home permanently; he was a contractor. The three daughters, who were married, had lost no time in rushing to their mother's bedside. And with their children in tow, except of course for the youngest, Bini, who had no children.

Her condition had worsened over the last two days. Earlier she could speak a word or two, was trying to sit up for drinking her glucose-water, was refusing vehemently to take medicines, and was looking around to see if all the children were by her side. But now she was incapable of doing any such thing. Her last question was—Hasn't Amu come yet? And then she had taken a sip of glucose-water and closed her eyes. The lips compressed as they were, seemed to have recessed further. The wan eyelids appeared to have tightened their grip over the eyes. And the sounds of heart were rather scary.

Is our mother going to die?. . . The daughters were sitting on both sides of her, and were wiping their tears from time to time. Bini was crying the most. She could hardly control herself, got breathless in trying to stifle the sobs, and went out, every now and then, perhaps to complete the process.

. . . The night had advanced. Doctor Adhikari had examined the patient, given her an injection, and had made the grave pronouncement, looking up and down in a thoughtful pause, "This night. Just this night. There is no cause for anxiety if we can get through this one. One has to keep a constant vigil, though. Please give me a ring immediately, if there is any. . I mean. .

cause for alarm." The cook and the servant, old retainers both, as also the new errand-boy had stood at the threshold at intervals, and retreated, each time, with increasingly sad and solemn looks. The relatives had taken their leave reluctantly as it would seem, after doing their bits of stroking and massaging the inert limbs of the patient. The pussy-cat denied of her quota of affection, had retired to some dark corner, to snuggle by herself. The steel front-gates were barred.

A light was burning only in the small upstairs room of "Sunanda Nivas" in which she lay. Winking at stray absent-minded lights of the midnight.

The night seemed endless.

"Ugh ! couldn't you stop this snivelling for a change?", Bharmar burst out suddenly, even as he went on pacing the floor and smoking furiously. As if the problem could well be solved but for this feminine sobbing. But the sisters did not appear to be upset over his words. Bini, the eldest, dismissed the younger brother with her looks. And Bithi, the second one and elder too, did not mind saying, "Why don't you go and have some sleep? Won't we call you, if necessary?".

Bhramar did not reply. But he thought he had a little too many sisters. More than proper. And they did not understand a thing.

He went over to the balcony, nursing his resentment. But, thanks to the refreshing cool air and the sight of the immense sky, he induced himself to thoughts of philosophy, inchoate as they might be—What is this life, anyway? Mother will die. Maybe she will. For sure, if you ask me. Then what ? The infinite, the endless! sky and stars ! What is this life, indeed!!

He discovered at this point of time that a light was burning in the Prayer room. It went off after a while, and he noticed that someone was coming out of the room. Stealthily, as it were, and then moving away in quick footsteps. A woman. Bini? . . That explains. She had been there to do some praying. Yet some more. And that is why she has been getting away so often from the bedside group!. . .

Of all the surprises! Bhramar smiled to himself Funny girl! Absolutely timid. Right from when she was a child. Don't I know her? Afraid of her shadow. Afraid of telling a lie, lest she would be caught. Thank God, she has been married off. Otherwise, I wonder what she would have done with her life on the passing of mother!

Bini had reached the head of stairs, Her gaunt and dark face was hardly revealing. But every pore of her body had tensed, it appeared to Bhramar, tuned as it was to a simple mind. He tried to dismiss the importance of the subject. . Dash it! she is stripling of a girl, after all!. . . But he failed to make

light of the situation. He had an odd feeling that Bini was pointing out to him the true nature of Death. Death was no infinite; it was intimate. Like the body. And darkness of the night. So one should visit the gods in the Prayer room. But I shall not go there, he reacted instantly. Not now, that is.

That does not mean that I don't love my mother!.



But he could not tear himself away from the vision of the little room on the groundfloor, now lying closed, and fastened with an old-fashioned hook. . . A single flame is burning in there, lighted by Bini, And there is smoke. Smoke and smell. A mix of burning wick, sandal paste, and rotting flowers. Age-old vermillion, layer upon layer, so much so that you can hardly make out the face of the deities. But He is present. Period. That is why we prostrate ourselves before Him, everyday after taking our bath.

I know it. That is one of the rules of the house. Maybe one could ignore it when father was alive. But not now, for father's photo is there, hallowed by a dash of vermillion. Fine. I have also done my obeisance this very morning. So there is no reason why I should go there again during the night, just because Bini has been overdoing it. In obedience, to a summons as it were, to prove my credentials before Him, the demon of a God or Judge, or whatever. And plead—May it please my lord, let my mother live, let her live for another ten years, hundred years! Stuff and nonsense! Whatever will be, will be. I will go there tomorrow—don't you hear me? But let this night pass. Hasn't the doctor said so too?. . .

Bhramar was looking pale when he came back to his mother's bedside. Bina noticed the distress of her brother, and she felt a surge of kindness for him . . . . I am the eldest sister, eldest of them all. I am earliest to be grown-up, and to make a home. Moreover I have married into a rich family. This Bhramar, this Bini, way behind me in the progress of life! I have bathed them with my own hands, even cleaned them after toilet. . . . Bina decided she must do something to prop them up. Some suitable words of advice, to start with.

But she found that Bini was hardly in a receptive frame of mind. She was sitting like a log, stupefied, and staring at a blank wall. As if she had cried it all out, had done with all possible thoughts, and was not prepared to hear anything from the world that had lost its relevance.

Then she found the other sister dozing. . . Bithi the delicate darling! Incapable of taking any burden on herself. Keeps herself prettified all the time, that's all, and goes on producing children. She has got six in a row, but is still asking for more, I suppose. . . She recalled the image of Nirmal, the husband of Bithi—dandy, but a good-looker, and loves Bithi to excess. Every night, for all you know. . . Shame! Isn't there anything else in the world?

Anyway, I couldn't care less! Bina came back from her thoughts about Bithi and concerned herself with her younger brother. The poor boy has grown pale and thin with worry, she noted, and began gently.

"Bhramar, won't you go and have some sleep? I have felt the pulse of mother. Seems she is improving".

"No it is alright. I will sit on this chair (Why are they after me?" Are they the only children of mother, the only ones whose hearts are bleeding for her?)

Bina realised that she had better move on to a different track. So she said, after a certain pause.

"Jadu has grown too old. Can't cope at all with his work. We should look for some strong fellow when mother gets well.

"Hmm" (Talks like a venerable sage. As if she knows that mother will get well).

"This big house, court-yard, back-yard, cattle and all. And no dearth of things packed in them. It's no easy task, to manage the whole thing".

"Hmm"

Bina got carried away by the sweep of her own words. Failed to notice that Bhramar was paying scant attention.

"Lands in the village, mango-grove, the building, company shares, besides all the cash. There is none to look after them. You have to do it. Amar is always away from home. So you have to assume all the responsibility".

Bina seemed to get choked with emotion as she recalled the weight and abundance of family wealth. She suffered a pang of regret. This Bhramar can't cope with it. In fact, nobody but me. The rooms, each one of them, are stuffed with trunks. Things will come tumbling down if you barely open the almirah in the middle room. Big fat books, each would cost not less than fifty rupees. Silverware galore. Countless silk sarees. Besides—the wealth of pure gold, the central core! I know where that is kept. None else. She has told me in confidence. Bina covered up her thoughts, as if the secret knowledge might get exposed and lose its shine.

She placed a hand over her mother. . My mother is dying, my long-suffering mother. I am her eldest child and daughter, the crown princess of the family. So I have to burden myself with this wealth, I have got to, if anything happens to mother. Manage it on their behalf, forgetting my own home, family, and children.

Suddenly Bina noticed that Bhramar was not merely keeping silent. He was angry. But with whom? With himself? Or with me? But why? I didn't do anything to him, tell him something wrong—did I?

It's no anger; it's hate. His eyes are filled with hate. He does not like me. None of them do.

Even he, my husband, does not love me. The way Bithi is loved by her husband. Or all other wives by their husbands, for that matter. Because I am dark and fat, supposed to be ugly. I look like my mother. But wasn't she loved by father? So? what's the sin that I have committed??

I was sixteen once. Learning to play the sitar. Govind-Sir was my tutor. Soft red-rimmed eyes. Would ask me to fetch some water to drink, the moment he came. Not merely water, I guess, but something more, if I could oblige. Mother sensed the game before I could, and did not allow him to quench his thirst. Not only Govind-Sir, there were many others too, I can swear to it. But she won't let them. . .

Bina gave her mother a long hard look, as though she was asking for an explanation from her, and was seeking a showdown before she passed on. Directing at her a flabby face, whipped up to reflect the resentment of a life-time. She hadn't had this courage, this privilege, earlier. The opportunity had come her way only today. For the first and last time.

But after a while she shouted herself down, inwardly. . No, no, no! Mother will open her eyes. She will live. That's what I want. For, I will grow old otherwise. Really old. And they will hate me even more. . . .

Maybe she would have hugged her mother, or done something else in a momentary impulse. But a strange thing happened that prevented her. Bithi muttered in her sleep. Muttered and fell over Bina in a heap. Then she opened her eyes, looked like a zombie, and panted as if she had just been exorcized of a ghost.

"Look here, what happened to you?" Bina asked

"No nothing. Had some dream, it seems".

Bina did not ask her about the dream. But she compressed her lips, and made it pretty obvious that she had a distaste for such things. . Bithi and her dreams! What else were they good for, these fair-skinned dolls!

Meanwhile Bhramar had again moved on to the balcony on the first floor and begun to survey the earth and sky.

. . . The world lies outside the gates. Other people. Their lives are different, deaths too. A row of shops opposite the gates, on the other side of the road. Tea-stalls, vegetable vendors, sellers of plastic toys, etc. They don't have to reckon with an ancient building, and its caves and pillars. No ancient mothers and sisters. They are not troubled by any heavy and dense feeling of greatness. Beyond, some fruit-orchards, and behind them the river. Bridge on the river. A moving train, steaming away to some far-off place. Into the centre of many new markets, avenues, and parks. And then the sea. Wave upon wave unlimited.

I shall get away. Bhai has gone around the entire world, has married outside the clan, does whatever he wants, and enjoys himself. Why can't I do the same? I am no child. I can do whatever he can. I have learnt many skills. I can even draw pictures and make a living, if it comes to that. I will marry a soft, slim and petite girl. Her laughter like the sound of ripples. She will cook nice dishes for me. And she will be looking at me admiringly, as I do my work.

He felt soon enough, that his desires were coming alive, growing wings for a flight. For this was no ordinary moment, this night was like no other. The breath of freedom was coming out of the backroom of a past. Beckoning to the future. Excitedly. Raring to play with unheard melodies of a flute, gentle murmurings of the morning breeze, and the glimmering lights. Signs, at long last, of a break. Of an unfolding, a blossoming forth.

Another night was opening out to a dawn.

Many sounds and voices. Many trees, plants, buildings and huts were showing up now, various and distinct. The old birds were calling out to the new ones. The stars were blinking a little too often, painfully anxious to leave the scene...

Bhramar kept looking at the outside world, even after the murmurs of the morning had thickened into a hubbub, and the familiar roar of a *Bhajan* was heard in the neighbourhood, along with the yelping of the street-dog when it got its first beating of the day. As if the day was still to arrive fully and finally, and he did not want to miss the honoured guest.

It was at this juncture that the gates were opened, and a solemn-looking gentleman came inside with a suitcase in hand and a young lady by his side. For a moment it seemed to Bhramar that this was yet another stride taken by the guest. It was a certain man of the morning.

Then he saw them at close quarters and shouted over his discovery—"Look, it's Bhai!"

The elder brother had come. Amar had arrived with his lady. And it seemed the entire family, servants and all, could not wait to welcome them personally, to "Sunanda Nivas".

But Bini slipped away from the reception committee and spoke to her mother in a silent effusive spell—Elder brother has come. Now you must live, no? Didn't you wait for him to come? But...but...did you just wait to see him? To open your eyes and see him and then go your way?

No! It shall not be so. I will not allow it!

Bini scanned her mother's face, anxious to find some hopeful sign or other.

II

Amar was a handsome person. His fair and chiselled face, animated lips, and darting glances made him appear young for his age. Sushama was a beautiful woman. Her smooth darkish face, sharp nose, the hint of an abiding smile on her lips, and deep-set eyes served to hold her years together and present them in a glow of fullness. The couple seemed to be made for each other, and claimed the attention of others.

Amar asked several questions and was free with his comments. But they were so disjointed that it appeared he was trying mainly, to communicate the importance of the event. That he had arrived. "Who is the doctor attending on her? .. Don't you have a nurse at night?... Don't let outsiders crowd around her ... How long is Bina going to stay?.. Has Bithi come with all her children? (smiles).. have you done the cardiogram? I had consulted with Col. Gupta, the noted doctor over there... Poor Bini has grown so pale and thin. Her eyes—(swollen due to crying or what?) .. No fears, I have a firm belief... where is Bhramar? Wasn't he here right now?

Amar proceeded to the mother's bedroom. Entered the room on tip-toe, lest she would be disturbed, kept looking for sometime at her supine and inert figure, and withdrew in a similar manner.

Suddenly she seemed to remember something, and looked for Sushama—"Sushama! Where has she gone? She should have her medicine now. Hey, Bini, look for your *Bhaujabohu*, will you? Tell her to take her medicines, it's getting late".

He added briefly in response to the unspoken concern and curiosity of the sisters, "She is not keeping well these days".

But when Bini conveyed the message to her sister-in-law she felt that she was not ill, and could never be.... see, she is stroking the kitten. Like as if she is her natural mistress, may, of time itself. No pettiness of an illness can ever touch her.

Anyway, even though she seemed to be the owner of Infinite Time, Sushama stopped stroking the kitten of her own free will, and went to the bedside of Sunanda Devi after a quick change of clothes. And like the ministering angel they had been waiting for, she took charge of the situation and addressed Bithi, "Now you go, all of you, and finish your work, I am here".

... Ten O' clock in the morning.

The old retainer Jadu was standing still in the verandah of the kitchen and staring upwards. Seemingly stupefied. His mouth slightly agape, and



the eyes rivetted on something. Reason: Sushama. The impressive stance of the "foreign lady" on the balcony.

Bina had come back from her morning chores, and was sitting at her appointed place at the head of the bedstead. Reading Bhagabad-Gita. Reading it at a fast pace, so she could finish atleast the second chapter. Who knows what was going to happen, whatever the doctor might say?

Bithi had not been to see her mother since this morning. She had meant to go soon after attending to the needs of her children, but hadn't been able to make it yet. Whereas she had called her third son Bitu thrice, in a row, for no apparent reason. Now she was kissing him once more before leaving for mother's bedside, and kissing him avidly from top to toe. As if she was hoping to smear him thick with a mother's love, so no portion was left bare and vulnerable for the enemy. And lisping words of love—"You are my son, only mine, and of no other. You are not going to leave me and go a-n-y-w-h-e-r-e else!" Finally she withdrew her face, looked him squarely in the eyes and said, "Go and play. And come to me only when I call you. And never go to grandma's room. Remember? That's a good boy!" She again recalled that terrible dream she had last night, after Bitu had left, and covered her face with her hands, as if she could not bear to see it again... Mother was asking for Bitu. saying "I will take away this son of yours!" And laughing indecently.. Blast the supid dream! Bithi gathered herself slowly to move on and join the bedside group.

Amar was in the Prayer room. He was praying thus after having taken his bath and put on a dhoti that he had unearthed from some old trunk—"Oh God! Please spare my mother. I maybe living away from her, far away, but she is still my mother. Don't snatch her away from me!" But he was compelled to open his eyes from time to time. As if someone else was manifesting herself on the dark canvas, seeking to monitor his thoughts, and he didn't like it... Who's Sushama in all this? Maybe she is my wife, lover too. But she does not belong to this house. She need not and should not come between mother and son... Amar tried to banish the image of the intruder with words such as these. But the macho feelings that went with the exercise served to distort rather than steady his prayers. For, his mind was assailed by the memory of a recent incident of power-play... Just three to four days back. The telegram from home, telling us about mother's critical illness, had been received during the day. Yet on that very night —! No, it was not passion, but anger. A certain ecstasy deriving from anger. I took her. Ravished her to my heart's content. So what? That means I defied death. Refused to yield to the fear. Made it known that... Amar could not pray anymore. Thought his mind was in a muddle due to worry and sleeplessness. But he also had a strange feeling of being beaten by the

women of the world, or maybe the gods, when he withdrew from the Prayer room.

Bini was in a small room, known as the Pickle room. Playing a guessing game with jars of pickle. Now, if I break open that one with a stone, will it yield mango pickle? or plum? Stop it! You are no child! Do you want God to get wrong ideas about you?

Bhramar was sprawled out in his bedroom. As if he was not prepared for a commonplace and unnecessary day like this, and would bestir himself only if he was needed, or after nightfall.

It was at this configuration of thoughts and behaviour in the family that there was a rekindling of hope, for a hand of Sunanda Devi moved slightly.

The family waited with bated breath.

But Sunanda Devi bided her time. And opened her eyes after ages. Then she looked at the people around her, like she was trying to figure them out and beckoned insistently to somebody or something. Glucose water? Bhagabad-Gita? The eighteen-piece array of bangles on the wrist of Bithi? It took them sometime to understand that she had noticed Sushama standing at her feet and wanted to know the significance of her being there. Bithi and Bina spoke out together, before Sushama could say anything—"Bhai has come, Ma!".

Amar was quick to place himself squarely before his mother, and add, "Sushama has come. Look, she is over there! She said she must come, even if she is delayed a little bit... Had to leave Toni (the son) as he has to do his studies, I mean, his exams.. Have taken leave for fifteen days, will extend it if necessary.. "

Sunanda Devi did not seem like listening. As if she had held the thread of life securely in her hands, and let there be no mistake about it. She would let it go, or gather it in, at a suitable time.

Thus the moments passed. Till Sunanda Devi closed her eyes once again. It is the final phase of coma, said the knowledgeable people. There was no escape now.

III

"Sunanda Nivas" slided into the afternoon, and was soon covered by shadows of the evening. The inmates of the house took charge of yet another night, and were restored in full measure, to the privacy of their sorrows. Not like last night, though. There was agitation then, rising heart-beats, and restlessness. Now the heart had sunk, and the tattooing

had ceased. A calm had taken over suggesting silent tears at leisure. Asking one to make peace with the inevitable.

All the bubbles had subsided by midnight. Leave aside Bini. All others in the intimate circle savoured quietly of their sorrow. Except for a pronounced sigh now and then—So it goes. End of the story.

Suddenly Sushama felt like invoking the sun. . . Couldn't the radiant sun straddle the night in a surprise strike? And tear open the grey darkness with its sharp flaming rays? This darkness is not a black, but gray and obscene. For the vaunted tradition of many ancient falsehoods had obscured the emerging truths; dark death had been caught in a mist. Sushama recalled how she was staring at the plum-tree this morning and was feeling sorry for herself. That she was not able to touch this world of theirs, and offer some solace or other. Alas, the question does not arise! she thought. Each one of them was shrouded in his or her own obscenity, imbibing the warmth of his own guilt, riddled as it was with patchwork. You could not reach them. Never.

Anyway, are they happy with themselves?—she wondered. The painfully heavy face of Bina apa, as if she had settled for being a block of stone after aspiring to be a mountain. . The watchful looks of Bithi, as though someone was waiting to steal a secret gem concealed in her ample bosom. . Bini's fear. Was she afraid of like or death?. . The drowsy withdrawn looks of Bhramar. Where had he vanished all through the day? Sleeping or hiding behind daylight?. . And her dear husband Amar Babu. Why did he hang his head down when he happened to see me alone in this house, as if he was ashamed of something?

No, they are not unhappy; they are incapable of happiness. They are stunted, grossly incomplete.

Sushama was startled by an improper thought that flashed through her mind like a sharp blade, in a bid to end her discomfort —

Why doesn't the old hag die, if she has to?

She heard somebody say, just as she was trying to control herself, "She has gone there again!"

"Who?", Sushama turned round to find that it was Bhramar. He was facing the courtyard and seemed like talking to himself.

"Bini. She has been visiting the place since yesterday. And all through today. Over and over again".

Bhramar was saying it wearily, like he was tired of the whole thing. Sushama looked askance at her brother-in-law.

Eventually she came to understand that the small room adjoining the store-room to the left of the courtyard was the Prayer room. The place

visited by Bini. She was familiar with the supreme importance of the room, as related to her by her husband. There were quite a few gods and goddesses over there, including their father's photo. And every member of the family was expected to visit it, atleast once every day.

What a simple and wonderful faith! Savitri-like persistence in love! How could I think such mean thoughts about a household that includes Bini, the Prayer room, and the flame of a sincerity that burns so bright? And such despicable thoughts about the old lady. . .

Sushama was smitten by remorse, and saluted them with folded hands—Bini inside the small room, her God, the old mother whom she had insulted, et al, and conveyed to them her deepest regards. And Bhramar followed suit, thinking that it was the proper thing to do in the circumstances.

Bini's extraordinary behaviour was getting a little too pronounced and frequent to escape everybody's notice.

The sound of her sobbing could be heard from inside the room, even the beating of her head against the wall, as the night entered the last quarter.

But the family did not mock her. Nor did they break down at the sight of her excessive expressions of grief. Sushama was increasingly fascinated. Bhramar made many salutations again, inwardly. Bina read Bhagabad-Gita more attentively and loudly. Bithi did not go to sleep, and went on caressing her mother. Amar grew more solemn and thoughtful.

It could well be said that they loved Bini at this moment, as if she conveyed, on their behalf, the sorrow entire. One family, one mother. Mother will not come back, nor will the sorrow be ever diminished. Bini is crying, let her cry. Praying like mad, let her. .

The peace of sorrow such as this, was suddenly razed to dust as the day dawned again in Sunanda Nivas. Doctor Adhikari made his appearance and announced on his own, 'The symptoms are hopeful".

Again!!

Was he a medical man or a witch doctor? Putting on a magic show or what? Sushama asked him in a challenging manner (and in English)—"Are you sure, Doctor?" And others did not spare him a dirty look or two.

But Bini did not bother about the rest of them. She burst out laughing in joy. Unrestrained, and without any sense of decorum, like a child. It seemed she was going to clap her hands and do a dance any time now. Which made Dr. Adhikari wonder, if she belonged really to the same family.

IV

After one week. Another scene of Bini and the Prayer room.

The deities were looking remarkably kindred and benign in the soft glow of the morning. The fragrance of freshly-gathered *champak* and *shefali* flowers was in the air. Bini, overwhelmed as she was by gratitude, was talking to her God.

A plate full of choicest snacks was lying in the middle room upstairs. All the brothers and sisters, and Sushama too, were waiting for Bini, so they could all eat together from the same plate. That is how the family would celebrate her recovery. Mother's wishes.

But Bini couldn't help being late. For, she was engaged in an intimate conversation: I bow to Thee, my God! A million times. You have heard my prayers. And have brought my mother back to life.

How foolish I could be! How did I ever imagine that she would leave us? She was trying to scare us. That was a ploy she is good at.

We wouldn't have let her die. What is left for us in her absence? She has sucked us dry. Has brought us happiness by trampling upon all our hopes and ambitions. By clipping our wings, just as we were raring to go on a flight. Mother knows what is best for each of us. She made our father pass on early in the day (It wouldn't have made much difference, if she had committed the act by her own hands). Because father wouldn't have been happy if he had lived long. She wanted Bada-apa to wallow in material wealth, for nothing else would suit her. She was learning to play on sitar at one time. But music might lead to love, she feared. She wanted Bithi apa to get married to a handsome husband, never mind if he was a rake, so she could go on producing children, and be happy. What else was Bithi-apa fit for? She wanted to possess Bada-bhai, tie him down to her (Bada-bhai looks like father). She smothered the dreams of Sana-bhai, asked him to stay put at this place, his nose to the grindstone. Poor boy, what could he have done with his dreams?

None of us could escape the clutches of her love. Bada bhai had tried. With a desperate leap at the sky. But could he make it? I wonder.

What about me? She asked after a long time. Perhaps she had saved this question till the end. . But who am I, after all? The tail-ender. Timid. Cry-baby. Has she taken anything away from me? I don't recall it, do I?

Bini could not deceive herself. They were smiling, all the gods and goddesses. The flute-playing Krishna gave her a knowing side-long glance. The goddess Durga assured her with her ten resplendent hands.

Lord Siva blessed her efforts with his half-closed eyes. Bini was encouraged.

Then she brought out one of the many photos in there. Snatched it away, as it were. Father's photo. She pressed it to her bosom, and to her lips.

She could not help addressing her mother "Ma! I suppose you thought you would die and be transformed into a deity with your photo in the Prayer room—no? And look down upon me, scornfully? Indeed!"

On coming out she found that they were all waiting for her upstairs. But Badabhai had put something in his mouth, a hot potato-ball or something, and was shouting "Wonderful!" over and over again. "Hello! where had you been so long? I couldn't wait any more", he said on seeing Bini (his facial muscles got distorted as he took another bite) "Mother is completely OK now, as you can see. So what were you doing so long with your God?" The quip caused a concerted roar of laughter.

Sunanda Devi was sitting on the bed, in a reclining posture. It appeared from her dried-up face, inured to life, that she would live on for another hundred years.

4 FISH MAYONNAISE

This was originally written in English by the author, and stands included in his English collection "Death of an Indian", published in 1984. Had appeared in a Sunday Supplement of the newspaper "Sentinel" published from Gauhati, Assam. It is also one of the stories in the collection "Contemporary Indian short stories in English", compiled by Shiv. K. Kumar, and published by Sahitya Akademi in 1991.

I could not have chosen a better spot in Gauhati for a quiet lunch together, in honour of our twenty-sixth anniversary. Pity, I was somewhere else, may be a big city, when I had to celebrate the Silver Jubilee lunch. For the frippery of an artificial pool (I recall the painted ladies too) could never match the charms of an ancient river—the mighty Brahmaputra. Add the privilege of having a cosy corner in the balcony with no diner in sight and you can well imagine why I was euphoric over my choice, the moment I sat down opposite Vandana, my wife, and fiddled with the menu-card.

My wife is a gentle soul and it took her some time to join in the euphoria. But when she did, I noticed a certain glow in her face, the like of which I had not seen for ages. And I was confident that my bid to initiate her into the joys of flesh-food would be a total success.

She is not a vegetarian by principle. It so happens that her parents are vegetarian, and she is not used to the smell and looks of a chicken leg, the hollowed head of a fish, and such-like objects in the platter. Give her some cake or a bite of potato cutlet with a thin stuffing of mincemeat, and she won't mind. But she is visibly uneasy with the complete works, and I haven't had the heart to force it on her. No, let me put it this way— my wife is easily persuaded, and I did not like to feel like a heel by making her do things which, as I knew, went against her natural affections. In food, dress, gossip, love-making or whatever. That apart, I had a strong notion, that if and when she took to the non-vegetarian pleasures, some damage may be caused to her gentle image: the fair rounded moon of a face, large and restful eyes, and the slow motion of smiles that rarely proceeds to laughter, that is, the common open-mouthed "ha-ha".

But I had not reckoned with anaemia, gastric troubles caused, as the doctors said, by insufficient protein, and a growing fear that the poor woman now in her late forties may miss out on a good thing of life, till it was too late. That is how we collaborated, and decided that we should

celebrate this anniversary over a proper non-vegetarian lunch cooked by unseen hands and served in a restaurant. The Brahmaputra was a bonus.

Even as she gazed at the river, flowing beneath us in the languid manner of a woman fulfilled, and continued to glow, I got busy in choosing the menu. I felt the presence of a bow-tied youngman standing beside me. But I took my own time. This was not going to be an ordinary lunch, a mere fling at pleasure of an odd holiday. It promised to be an event.

The young man coughed and started murmuring his "Sir", but I went on scanning the continentals, chinese, tandooris, and what have you, with meticulous care. There was no problem with soup, bread and vegetables. But what about the central dish? The non-vegetarian core? Let him wait a while, this young fellow. How would he know about the aesthetic dimensions of a wife such as Vandana?

Eventually it was an inspiration. Fish mayonnaise. Chunks of white and soft drowned in the pale yellow wonder of a sauce. That's it. I turned to the bystander and gave the orders.

And then I noticed the haunted yet cruel looks of the young man. "Thank You, Sir", he said, adding for no reason that his name was Suresh. I should have known that more was to come. Here was no ordinary waiter, either.

I did not intrude on the reverie of Vandana. I waited for her to say something in recognition of her own desires. She does not have to say thanks, I thought, but I must have an expression beyond the glow— to let it be known that this is what the doctor ordered. The prelude to newer pleasures of the palate. All because of me. And as I watched her and cast a sidelong look at the river, it occurred to me that there was an uncanny affinity between the two. Like a woman fulfilled, I had said of the river— didn't I? Swollen, that is, with the bounties of rains and rivulets, and gliding past the world in silences of happiness. Not for her gushing and gurgling feats to claim your attention but faint ripplings, barely writing a smile, all to herself, over all that she has received and absorbed; the riches of the world. The same with Vandana. Forget the physical aspects, the slim frame touched by anaemia, the rather loud colours of her sari worn for the occasion, etc. She is a fulfilled woman. Swollen with the loves she has received and absorbed from the man in her life, and from her children, and from the old widow, one Mrs. Barua who lives down the lane, as also from many other uncles and aunties who would have crowded around for the mere asking and blessed her memory lane of forty-seven years. The gentle image is not a gift from the heavens; she has earned it. And so let my fair

lady look upon her mirror-image and commune. No hurry dear, let the minutes pass...

"Look, look!" she suddenly said, pointing somewhere between the land and water, where you saw the inevitable boats, ramshackle huts, and quite a few of those big birds, circling around the water-front. I obliged her, but found nothing of special interest.

"The way the eagle got his nose wet... who asked him to dive like a seagull or something?" she continued.

I did not care to correct her on facts. That was a common kite, not an eagle. And I pitied the poor bird, for I took it that he did not get a bite, the ample and proud river would not give him a chance. Like a woman fulfilled— my foot! I began to regard her with a sense of envy... and a certain fascination. That she has not received but acquired them— the loves and lives and what have you. She wanted to have them. Period. And she was not going to share the gold that easily with mere kites. Or with men for that matter.

I saw more of them diving, as it seemed, for nothing. As if it was indeed gold and not fish that she could easily part with. Or as if the fish were deep inside her in contentment, and she would not let them be disturbed. But I was rather disconcerted to find that Vandana was enjoying the scene. I did not like the metaphor I had imagined for her a few minutes back, that she was akin to this river etc. She could be proud on occasions, but not close, like the other one. And cool about it, you know what I mean.

That young man of a waiter, Suresh if you will recall, appeared again from somewhere. He was leading no procession of trays carrying food. Apparently he was anxious to gain precedence over more appetizing fare. The shuffling of his feet was unmistakable. And didn't his moustaches, the bushy kind, flicker even as his eyes bored into you? In a moment he gave—

"Excuse me, sir, are you an Oriya?"

"Eh?— yes", I said haltingly for it took me a little while to make sure that he too was an Oriya and was trying to be friends. Not one of those smartaleck types who presume to spot you out by your features, speech and movements. I could, of course, place him easily by his rounded accents, among other things (the eyes were an aberration). But I have seen much more of this wide world, I told myself. And was I not about twice his age?

Seemed he could read into my thoughts. For he started off thus, unmindful of the imposition, and the wasted minutes—

"I am also an Oriya, sir. You would not know me for one (grinning with uneven but sparkling teeth), for I have hardly been in Orissa. I have been moving round the world for the last several years. Dubai, Nairobi and the East. Hongkong, Bangkok and then Singapore, that was the last one before I came to India on a holiday. But then I have stayed on. That's because. . ." He broke off with a shy smile hardly matched by the glint in his eyes. And I had again to take note of those impossible eyes, seemingly haunted, but anxious to pass on the fears to you, if he could help it. The glint was ominous. I braced myself; it was time to get rid of him.

". . . Because I got married, sir. A typical village girl, her name is Bindu, comes from Bankulia, near Gope, Puri District. . ."

That did it. I failed to stop him now and forever, for my wife turned away from Brahmaputra and fixed her trusting eyes on this talkative Oriya of an waiter. She belonged to Puri. And possibly the same area. So he went on, unchecked—

". . . But immediately after the wedding I brought her to Calcutta. And from there to this place. You know why? She wanted to have a darshan of the goddess Kamakhya. Kamakhya Devi will fulfil my wishes, she said and I did not ask to know." Pause for a superior smile . "And then it all started—"

"You mean—"

"These killings, sir. . ."

Vandana was wide-eyed. One would think she heard about it for the first time, was not in the habit of reading newspapers, and had never listened to my debate with friends over those awful events. May be I was not in Assam then, and was still trying to resist the orders of transfer. But that did not matter. We were fully aware of the situation, wife and husband. So why does she behave thus? Hanging on to his words. . . like as if she too was a village girl and was eager to hear about the stirring events first-hand from the lips of a native Othello! I was disgusted. What happened to my fish mayonnaise? How long does it take in this lousy joint to serve an order— a simple straightforward order?

The narrator stopped in his tracks. For a prosperous-looking diner had sailed in and was looking for a place to seat his substantial wife and many children. "Excuse me", he said and left us with the thud of a preamble. Was I relieved? No sir, knowing as I did that while he would save us from the proximity of this new diner and his brood, he would come back and oblige us with his inestimable presence. All through the meal. From soup to dessert, past the cherished fish mayonnaise. Well, what cannot be cured. . . But why, my dear man, the killings? Couldn't you do better than that?

Let me hope, he will lose the thread. But I had little hope, as I remembered how he had stressed the syllables, as if he had joined in the act, clenched teeth and all. Oh no, I was exaggerating, I told myself.

But why, indeed, the killings?

The question came back to me with the original headlines of two months back, and the anguished breast-beating of our esteemed leaders. Dash it! I am not thinking of the "why's" on these lines. I am not a politician. And I am not responsible for a thing. But the point is, why talk about it now over again? And on a day that I had organised with such loving care? The fellow would not give us any peace, I said aloud. Whereupon she smiled. In the usual gentle manner, exasperatingly so, and amused. What was worse, she added "There is a lot more to come I am sure. . . " I could not decide if she was teasing us both or was genuinely interested in his story, killings and all. As if she did not care for the special day, or for peace either.

It was a stock reaction, you may say, but I looked to Brahmaputra for a breather. The intrepid kites had retired. Beaten and exhausted. The placid river was reigning supreme with her elusive ripples. And the dark boats and dinghies were playing true to form, stroking her amplitude. . . in timid gestures of love. It has to be love, she seemed to suggest, or else.

He came back when we had started sipping the newly-arrived tomato soup. I found the soup below par in colour, flavour and taste. But my wife said "Good!" before I could comment. That is when I began to seriously wonder. . . but let that pass.

"I was talking about the killings, sir", he resumed, asking us, as it were, to banish other hopes and possibilities. "Bindu said let's go back. That was natural. But I had other ideas. These things would never happen in the countryside of Puri or anywhere else in our Orissa. There is no knowing if there will ever be a war in your lifetime or mine. So why not see it all?— I told her. . . see how it happens. . . we do not have to join them but we can always watch from a distance. I was then the sales rep. for a pharmaceutical and that gave me the advantage. Bindu agreed eventually. I made her realise that she was my wife after all, and she should love a bit of adventure. . . "

I imagined the way he would have overpowered and overwhelmed the poor girl with his urban smirk, cruel (lusting if need be) eyes and smooth talk. Adventure, indeed!

Vandana was wiping her lips at the end of the soup. In the relaxed manner of having enjoyed the first course. And the opening chapter.

"I took her to meetings, gatherings of men and women at the foot of the jungles, in Namghars (community prayer halls), schools. . wherever I

could smell the atmosphere. I am not a partisan, no sir. Of course I have every sympathy with the Assamese; the foreigners have no business to pollute their hearths and homes. But where could the so-called foreigners go? Our Prime minister was right when she said. . ."

For once I could appreciate the trend of the monologue. The young man was not uninformed. He had a sense of perspective.

"But I felt the excitement. They were angry, the Assamese, Bengalis, Muslims, tribals. . . the like of which I had never seen before. I saw how sharp the spears were, the *daos* that were itching to chop off the enemy heads and the arrows dressed to kill. I heard the war-cries, the beating of drums under the moon, as they used to do in style in the good old days. Here was Mahabharata, after many thousands of years, I told Bindu, we were lucky to be alive and see it all. . ."

The fish mayonnaise had arrived in the meanwhile.

Vandana did not allow me to explain how the entree had been specially selected by me to suit the beginnings of a change—or revolution, if you



will—in her food habits. An instant appraisal and then she proceeded to do her best. Or so I thought. "But could you really see it all, you and your wife... I mean the whole things... with your own eyes?" she asked while the fish entered her palate for the first time.

"Yes, ma'am", he said, and moved closer to her. But he declined for the umpteenth time to sit down and talk like an old friend. It was not permitted, I knew. But was it fair, this standing onslaught on our leisure? This conning of a lady, no kin to her? However, it was too late in the day to do anything about it. He was well inside the home grounds.

"Yes ma'am", he repeated. "May not be the doings as such, but what comes after. But let me continue... you know Didi, the many languages I have been able to learn these few months? They are really great, each one of them, when they are shouted. Roared like a lion, in angry heroic terms. I remember in *jatras* of my childhood days. I could not understand a word, for it was too chaste and highflown for me. But the voices of the Rajas and Rakshasas, heroes and villains, could I ever forget them?... "

What about the voices of pipsqueak Ranis? sighing damsels? jesting Brahmins? Don't you ever remember them?— I felt like needling him like a brother-in-law, peeved at the way he had started addressing my wife as Didi. But there was such sincerity and passion (fake in retrospect) in the crescendoing words and such glee in those eyes, cruel as they may be, that I remained dumb over the rest of the discourse, and I decided to enjoy my fish mayonnaise.

"Bindu didn't have the stamina to move with me all over the valley, from one battlefront to another— from Kokrajhar to Nalbari, to Jagiroad past Nellie, which was brewing then, to Sipajhar, and on to Gohpur. I left her with a friend in Chandrapur. It is very near Gauhati. I hope you have seen it, sir. A beautiful place in the lap of hills, with the river Kalong flowing by. It meets Brahmaputra just a little ahead, you can almost see the confluence from over there..."

The audience kept quiet. The fish was tasting a little different, but that could be my imagination. And Vandana had no comments to offer on the dish or on the narration.

"But I scoured the earth on behalf of my company (another of his ungainly grins), and became a part of the raging war, each against all. Including the C.R.P. men... they were some heroes too, believe me, with their handle-bar moustaches, robust frames, shields and helmets like those of Assyrians, and above all, a benign contempt for everything and everybody in this part of the country. It was a great experience, I am telling you sir, a war at last to end all wars, an election to end all elections, all in the cause of our Motherland... "

So he went on and on with graphic and colourful descriptions of the various warfronts, claiming that he was there somewhere, that he had even shouted the slogans and swear words, even if he did not wield a spear or *dao* or whatever. But it was clear that he did not really see it all. He was not really a part of the action, as he had himself said. So what was all this bravado about?

I began to relax. And he also seemed to have exhausted himself. I looked at my watch and glanced at my wife, carrying on famously with the first flesh-food in her life. A cloud had come over Brahmaputra, hastening the shadows of the evening. A little too soon, I thought.

But he had reached the evening of his Mahabharata. For he indulged in a long pause and a longer sigh. And then served it neat—

"It was all over when I returned to Chandrapur and took place by the side of my wife, on the banks of the river Kalong. It was a cool evening, and we were watching the setting sun. And then we saw them floating by, one after another. First came an old man, bloated and sightless; even the crows felt cheated and left it alone. Next, as my wife remembers, the headless trunk of a boy. Then some odd hands and legs, looking like they were made of clay, insides out,— you know what I mean? Till the young people came, almost in a procession. Why no babies? My wife asked me. And I told her that they would not have survived thus far, for the fish would have eaten them. These are bodies that the fish have not been able to consume, and have had to share them with crows and the bigger birds. Kalong will carry them along to Brahmaputra and who knows, they may yet reach the sea. Anyway we counted them, Bindu and I, till it became dark; the tally was twenty-three. Not a very large number, when you consider the total of three thousand or more, but we found it quite impressive, for the river was a tributary after all, and the evening was silent. Besides, the number is not all that important, you have to consider the quality. The young bodies far outnumbered the rest. And among the young there was a gem. The fresh and tender body of a girl, looking like a bride— even Bindu screamed when the crows pecked at her, starting with the eyeballs. . ."

But I did not scream. I am not my daughter's keeper. I do not blame the govt. either, for it has always been on the side of peace. And that young man, if you ask me, was no more than a pompous ass. However, I have not been able to agree with my dear wife till this day (forget about her affinity to Brahmaputra) that the fish we ate had no smell.

5 A SAUCER OF MILK

This too, is one of the stories originally written in English by the author and stands included in his English collection "Death of an Indian". It has also appeared in "Chandrabhaga", English journal edited by Jayant Mohapatra in its 1st issue (1979).

She is happy as an animal.

I do not know if she has really taken to me. These animals are properly selfish in their happiness. Well, she is after all a cat, an animal and child, and I am a man aged fifty plus, prone to philosophy and a natural contempt for the philistines—that is, my fellow-tenants, the honourable Experts from all over the world made to live under the same roof.

She has finished with the saucer of milk and is licking herself to greater happiness. I cannot possess her, there is no question about it. But I am sure she will come to me more than to any of those people.

She is a healthy cat, black all over except for patches of white around her paws; seeming like summer shoes. She belonged to Tina. Tina was in this apartment house for three months and has gone back to her home, somewhere in Italy.

She is no Tina, this cat. But when you meet the cool green eyes, you have got to remember. That is the least you owe to her disturbing ethereal presence.

How could the ethereal be ever disturbing? You would never know. Your deliberate pose of defying divinity with your dirty denims, strident jazz, unkempt hair and the ugly yawn of boredom would never allow you to feel the pain of the ethereal... the suffering inflicted by the blue skies of Swaziland on those hills breaking out in multiple colours of agony, writhing in multitudinous shapes of boulders, splinters, peaks and what have you, the common sights you pass by on week-ends on your mindless drives to Pigg's Peak or somewhere. You Rody Steiner, Sonny Sommerville, Prince Banerji, Pat and Patricia, the young people who presume to own and spurn life at the same breath.

Now you, the few middle-agers. Ali Hussain, Mr. Green and Dr. Pitkin, you gentlemen who are equally aware of the necessity of God and sex at your age, but do not know how to go about it without inviting comments. I have seen you flipping through the pages of the Happy Hooker and the unclad forms of female flesh in the book-stalls of the Swaziland News Agency. Good luck to your prayers behind the heavy curtains. But why

should you expect me to believe that your feelings for Tina were wholly paternal, with no shades of Lolita or the like?

Essentially, all of you, the young people and the old, the Experts drawn from many countries of the East and the West wish to make a neat pile by the end of your contract. For you, Tina was a diversion or may be a bonus. Nor did you really care for her cat. Otherwise, the animal would not have neatly bypassed you and mewed at my doors.

I too am an Expert assigned to Swaziland to help them with their educational problems. I am also fond of my extra money. But as I have said before, I am a thinking person. I can think and realise and suffer. . .

The cat is looking at me, grateful, I suppose, in a tentative bid to be possessed. But I do not want to possess a cat, an animal, a child. For possession is an extinction, an end to the ethereal pain, if you will pardon the repetition. I wish only to cherish and record the memory of an experience. The greatness of an experience, which can never be truly laid bare before anybody, even my dear family back in India.

I do not know when she came to be a young tenant of our Jacaranda House, as the daughter of some Italian engineer, attached to a private firm, a mere non-Expert who could somehow manage to secure temporary accommodation in a building meant for the Experts. Somebody, may be my Pakistani brother Ali Hussain, told me that an outsider has been smuggled into our building. Such are the ways of this strange country. But I could not care less. I was then deeply immersed in my studies of the Being by Heidegger, and I could hardly be bothered by the incomings and outgoings in the Jacaranda House.

Till I met Tina. I remember to have seen her first when she was looking so very happily at the manipulations of a cat on the topmost slender boughs of a non-descript tree in the front of our house. Her shared joy with the prankster was hardly inspiring. I could easily dismiss her as an overgrown kid, seeking fun beyond the limits of her age and circumstance. But I was fascinated by the eyes—not merely the emerald green, common to so many Europeans, but the loving penetrating lust in her expression. As if she was determined to bind herself with the progress of the cat, a creature of her choice, and was inviting all the world to join her in the intense occupation. Here was no ordinary fun. It looked as though she was making herself, in total joy, to become the cat. And then she asked me a silly question—do you see my lizard? My black beautiful lizard?

My answer, I believe, was appropriate and the smile sympathetic. The Lizard, yes, I said. Or you may call it a snake or a man walking upside



down. It is wonderful, . . .isn't it?. . . by the way, what is your name, little girl?

Call me Tina. . . and I am not a little girl. Then she forgot all about me, looking upwards at the latest progress of the black animal scratching at some crevice beside the junction of a bough and the trunk.

I crept away and apart, down the hill to the Alister Miller street to buy my daily milk and bread. But I was reminded of Heidegger. Man is a creature of distance; he is perpetually beyond himself. And doesn't the rare person have the gift of running away in a sprint, in a burst of intenser life, and of distancing into the animal soul of a cat? Why should I label her as a little girl maturing in small curiosities to an average state of zero? I told myself that she was indeed unique; the glitter in her green eyes was unmistakable. That is when I felt that she was akin to the ethereal, and I turned back to look at her.

I did not like the scene. The stumpy bearded Rody Steiner, mining Expert from Germany, was holding Tina aloft to make her see the feline wonders at close range. Holding the young body of Tina, palpably, knowingly. . I just did not like the scene, the all-too-innocent act. I wanted to tell her to get off and behave. Was she not like my daughter, after all, who needs to be warned against these people?

I felt foolish and went along on my way. What is Tina to me and I to Tina that I should weep for . . .etc.

But I could not avoid reverting to the subject. We are all outsiders in Swaziland, not merely in the legal sense. We owe no allegiance to the great Ngwenyama* and the morals monitored by him for his own people. We also consider ourselves free of the so-called inhibitions of our own civilisations. In the result, you have the libidos running amuck, the denims getting dirtier and dirtier, and for the older ones, the colours of secret sin. What would poor Tina know about these things, the oddities of the adult mind in a country far from home?

I do have the credentials for protecting the young innocent. Apart from being a thinking person, I am the father of a daughter older than Tina. She is doing her medicine in India, and we are lovingly proud of each other. I have also my devoted wife at home. . . but that is another matter. There is nothing wrong and foolish in my concern for the little girl, I told myself in clear terms.

It so happened that I was not given enough time to forget about her. Thanks to the cat, we had to meet each other again before the week was out.

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* Leader of the people, a native title of the king of Swaziland.

It was one of those electric storms that herald the beginnings of summer in the hills of Swaziland. Doors and windows rattle as if in an earthquake, and thunderbolts seem to be hurled at random from above. An ideal atmosphere for Heidegger. No wonder I could not hear the persistent knocking at my door, and when I did it was the lithe form of Tina, hugging the cat.

She begged to be excused. Her story was told breathlessly as one would expect from a girl in the present situation. What she said was that the cat was hungry, and her parents were out and she wished to have a saucer of milk for the animal. No problem, I said, and the cat was duly offered her dues. But what about your wet clothes? I am used to getting wet and I am not affected by the cold virus, she answered with a reassuring smile. Making it appear that she was above these petty afflictions.

Her gaze rested on Heidegger and then on the other impressive writers of literature, philosophy, psychology, higher fiction and higher political studies. Open admiration of my choice in books is quite common, even from the shallow casual types who do me the honour of visiting once in a while. I did not want this little girl to join the chorus. It would have been obviously false and insincere. But the question she asked me came with a clap of thunder.

"You are a lonely man, Mr. Sinha—aren't you?"

"Well yes—I am without my family, you know, but it is only for the last eight months I have been here and I will be back home in a few more months—unless of course the contract is extended." And I hastened to add, lest she would start gathering some pity in her young head "you see, I always have my books, my constant companions in India as over here. . . "

Then she fastened her eyes on me, those cool green eyes as if she was not interested in my unnecessary recital, and was trying to entrap me in her Being, as she was doing to the cat.

She talked about other trivial matters while she was at my place and the storm was subsiding. The absence of snakes in Mbabane, her mother's craze for knitting too many sweaters and cardigans, her father's poor knowledge of English, etc. But after she left, I recalled those brief moments when her eyes were focused on me, and I felt uncomfortable.

Not that she was mocking at me. The ethereal cannot and does not indulge in mockery. But it does tantalize. In reaching into me—a man and not an animal—she was teasing me with the whisper of an answer.

But how could I help her with the complete answer and be happy and relieved unless I got closer to her?

Some days later my burly Pakistani fellow-expert Janab Ali Hussain was confiding in me—"Have you noticed?. . . This new girl. They are all after her. Dr. Pitkin, Prince Banerji, Rody Steiner and all the rest. They have even stopped throwing those noisy parties with girls and booze for the last several week-ends. . . well, better sleep for old people like you and me (broad grin). . . but what a shame! What an awful bloody shame!!" Thus he nodded his head sideways in profound regret and rushed to look after his fowl, chicks and what have you. He was the Dairy Expert.

Maybe I did not like the ways of Ali Hussain. But that was beside the point. I had every reason to be happy that wild drunken parties were not going to foul the night-air of our week-ends any more. It was surely a tribute to my philosophical insight that Tina had a touch of the ethereal about her and was capable of improving the world. But was not my friend somewhat mixed-up in his statement? What had Dr. Pitkin to do with the noisy parties? And why should that sad and solemn middle-ager, the expert creator and destroyer of plants—he had a doctorate in horticulture—take a particular interest in Tina? I considered it advisable to watch the movement of this estimable gentleman, more than those of the young people.

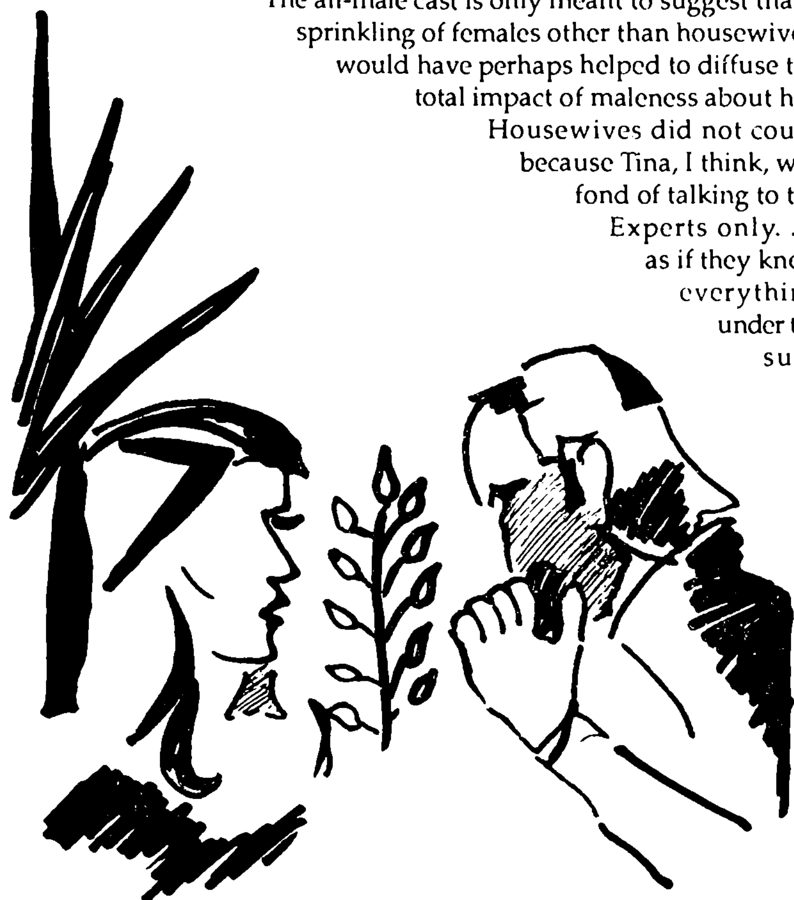
I said hello to him at the earliest opportunity when I happened to see him at the Post Office waiting patiently at the rear-end of a queue. He said hello. Period. I talked about the worsening weather and he seemingly agreed with compressed lips. I persisted by commenting on the paucity of counters at the Post Offices. The response remained facial. The barest movement at the right hand corner of the dial. I gave up. I decided that here was a specimen of humanity unfit for any attention whatsoever by Tina. For why should a loving living being deal with a walking lump of earth? But if she does . . . it would be so very unnatural and dangerous. Tina should be warned.

How do I go about these warnings? Visit her shadowy parents on some evening and start talking about Tina and the evil ways of the world? I could not decide on the *modus operandi.* I bided my chance.

Fortunately Dr. Pitkin did not bother me for long. It should have been obvious to me that since there were flowers and shrubs all around the Jacaranda House, including of course a couple of Jacaranda trees, Tina would like to know all about them. And who could help her more than this doleful doctor? I discovered the two of them more than once at the foot of some tree or other engaged in gesticulating conversation. I was satisfied.

However there were the others. The familiar sight of Tina moving about the lawns of Jacaranda House or sitting on the steps of somebody's flat with the cat invariably attached to her and talking to my

fellow-experts—cent per cent male—was not an encouraging phenomenon notwithstanding the fact that the wild parties seemed to have stopped.



The all-male cast is only meant to suggest that a sprinkling of females other than housewives, would have perhaps helped to diffuse the total impact of maleness about her. Housewives did not count because Tina, I think, was fond of talking to the Experts only. . . as if they knew everything under the sun!

I have deliberately excluded Patricia. I am told that she is also an Associate Expert on something or other. But unfortunately she is indistinguishable from Pat, her fiance, the Expert on handicrafts, with whom she is said to be "living together" in the accepted lingo of the modern world. I am not raising my moral eyebrows. I am only saying that her being a woman rather than a man is irrelevant.

Pat and Patricia, hailing from the Netherlands, are almost of the same height, nearer six. They have the same length of matted hair. They wear of course the same kind of clothes, in the best traditions of unisex, but the

respective areas covered by the clothes also appear to be identical in the three known dimensions. What is worse, they laugh in the same uproarious manner as though joy is an aggressive exercise. Yet I was not prepared for a snatch of conversation between Patricia and Prince Banerji which I happened to overhear on one of my evening constitutionals. Isn't she a sexy little thing?—said Patricia referring to Tina (who else) with evident relish. Her male companion offered a sweet smile.

The indecency of the remark was inexcusable. But what made me die of shame was that my handsome compatriot was not merely effeminate; he was a spineless gutless wonder.

How could he possibly agree? How could he, Price Banerji, who hails from Bengal and professes to exude Indian culture in every careless gesture and smile agree that Tina is sexy??

Unless, the word no longer means what it should mean among the young people. Or unless it was a knowing smile...

Horrible thought! I cursed myself for having allowed the horror to creep in. Prince may be the worst lecher on earth, but Tina could never have succumbed! Never!!

Here are the known facts about Prince Banerji. Prince is obviously a nick-name given by his doting parents which he has assumed as his first name. He is an accounting expert. I have included him among the youngsters because he affects their ways of life and moves with them. But he should be at least in his middle thirties. Furthermore, he has with him here an Indian wife and a four-years-old son. What makes him important in the estimation of the modern young bachelors of Jacaranda House is that he plays the violin and guzzles wine equally well. He is one of the musts in their wild parties, so says Ali Hussain and adds that his wife invariably stays at home on those occasions with a headache.

Now, if you accept Tina's affinity to Dr. Pitkin through flowers and trees why shouldn't you allow her to move closer to Prince through music?—I asked myself. But I could not but remember that Ali Hussain mentioned his name, specifically among others. Secondly, a handsome profile added to music is a volatile combination which may not necessarily lead to sexiness, but.. well... may cause wrong attachments.

As days passed I suffered increasing restlessness on behalf of Tina. I could not concentrate on philosophy, the contemporary events in Soweto... and a mortal fear seized me when I found to my bewilderment that I could not absorb myself entirely in the loving letter from my own daughter, having seen Tina a few minutes back in the company of Pat.

What has happened to me? Classic symptoms of jealousy explained by the standard psychology of a susceptible male living without family? Ha-Ha—I said to my standard psychoanalyst. What do you know about the rare, the exotic. . . the ethereal. . you have no pretensions to spiritual knowledge, have you? So please let me be alone and let me think of. . . Tina, if it has to happen that way.

The party thrown by Sonny Sommerville did not improve matters, though it offered me the chance of meeting her again and talking to her parents who were still at the nodding range. Sonny, the sugarman—I mean the Expert on sugar technology—was going home to England at the end of his contract and hence the party. The party promised to be small. The host was Sonny, the only youngster who was so intent on being the joker of the decadent age that he could perhaps be spared even by the good Lord on the day of reckoning. He could make the child Tina laugh so well, that no flirtations, however subtle they might be in the presence of her parents, would be worth the effort. That is how I thought. And I was confident that I could engage her in a long satisfying conversation, since Ali Hussain, now on a tour to the interior, would not be present to observe and comment at leisure.

I was sadly mistaken. For one thing, Sonny started on a sentimental prelude on the occasion of his departure from the most bountiful and beautiful country in free Africa. No wonder the jokes, when they came, did not produce the desired result. The audience did not want to be reminded of their own contracts. Secondly, Tina was not obliged to laugh, for Mr. Green, the grey-haired eminence of the Buildings, was talking to her continuously in a monotone, while the jokes were being perpetrated.

Did I have to be jealous of even the granddaddy? Please do not be so tiresome with your questioning, I told my psychoanalyst over again. Mr. Green, an adviser in the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, is said to be the oldest tenant of Jacaranda House, but his white hair and moustache are misleading pointers to his age. That apart, there is a certain deliberateness about him . . . the way he enunciates every word, the way he would be killing live chicken for dinner—my maid told me about it—which can overpower a gentle mind. So naturally I got a bit anxious. But never mind. What bothered me more was the situation after dinner when Tina was foisting her concentration on Rody Steiner. The same eerie empathy that I had noticed in her eyes when I saw her for the first time in relation to the cat. Rody Steiner is no cat. He is an undesirable person. He makes a habit of having mistresses black, coloured, and white, every week-end—so they say. Is it not unfortunate that Tina should get involved with this character in such an intimate way? Intimate or deep or whatever. . .

Towards the end, I got round to having a chat with Tina's parents. That was the saving grace of having attended the party. The Karaberis, that is the parents, invited me cordially to visit them next Saturday evening over a cup of coffee. Thank you, I said most heartily. I looked forward to the evening.

The evening came not a day too soon. I enjoyed the coffee, the talk about the forthcoming national election in Italy, the jovial manner of the father, the matronly ways of the mother, and the sweet silent presence of Tina... till I heard the news. Mr. Karaberi mentioned, among other things, that due to certain developments back home, they are going to leave Swaziland in a couple of weeks.

It was one of those things, a faint tremor that passes you by, and develops into the doom, in a matter of a few seconds. In a couple of weeks... the father was quite positive in his statement. Tina was sitting still like a statue. Mother dear was tinkering with the coffee pot, ... I do not know if she was offering to pour a little more of the liquid in my cup. The cat arrived from somewhere and they looked so happy over the happening that I felt like the guest who had stayed beyond the decent hour. Very well. But... how could Tina leave Jacaranda House and Swaziland, leave for all time to come, without any notice, forethought, consideration?

How could she leave without telling me something...?

She left almost the next day, saying good-bye to each one of us, like the well-behaved school-girl. But that was the ordinary little girl who caused a flutter in Jacaranda House, quite naturally and understandably, for three months. The other one, the ethereal Tina, had talked to me one golden evening in the lap of the hills, where the huts of the primeval man were sending out echoes of drumbeats unto the unknowable, and the goats were sucking deep into the green of the earth. She told me that even at this age, I could relate... to people, to the obscure little clerk in India who thought I could help to usher in the revolution, to my old friends who have forgotten the lines we hummed to each other over the bathroom walls, to my good wife who has a good husband and has tucked away the silly letters somewhere, to my daughter who wonders evermore at my greatness... to enter and relate to death, she said, like a man and not an image. You can even relate to me, she said, in any way you like, with a shameless laughter that rolled down the hills. You need not be lonely, she said , and kissed me.

May be, it was a dream, a wish that was not to be fulfilled for a man who stands condemned to anxiety by Heidegger and his tribe. But don't you see, it was only me to whom she could transmit the message of love...

witness this cat, this animal. . . whereas you people are back to your old selfish sinful ways? I can see the bottles moving in, dear Prince Banerji, for the week-end orgy. I can see you Rody Steiner with your latest companion. I pity you all, the young and old alike, for having failed to realise that there could be a Tina who was very different, as she was to me. . . breaking into my loneliness with the loving, penetrating lust in her eyes.

Oh, why don't you believe me, my God, for a change?

6 THE VISITOR

The Oriya original "Atithi" is included in the author's 2nd collection "Laksha Bihanga", published in 1968.

The English version is a translation of the Oriya original by Sri K.K. Mohapatra and Sri Leelawati Mohapatra, and stands included in the English collection "Wild Peacock and other stories". It has also been adopted by the Sahitya Akademi for publication in their forthcoming book which attempts to bring together excerpts from significant works in various Indian languages since Independence.

'Listen,' Suniti's husband rang her up from the college, 'You're going to have a visitor this evening. From your parent's place.'

Suniti was thrilled. It was a long time anyone from home had shown up since her mother visited her during last Holi. In fact, it cheesed her so much that she had recently dashed off a stiff letter home, complaining about their indifference.

Who's come? she wondered.



Guess who,' her husband tittered. 'Your Jagudada. Don't you remember him—Jagadishbabu the advocate? Okay, listen, I have gone and invited him to tea. Don't take long to prepare something. The old man has to catch a train at seven in the evening... I'm afraid I'll be stuck up here the whole evening. Meeting of the lecturers

association, you know, I hope you do not mind, do you, my pretty little golden girl. . .'

Golden girl. Her husband's term of endearment. He was so sparing about it that everytime he used it Suniti felt she was some kind of a white mouse or rabbit— petite, tiny, furry and cuddly—whose only desire in life was to snuggle close to the husband, his protective arms engulfing her completely.

Today, however, the name failed to weave its spell. The magic was missing. Jagudada would be coming here this evening, Suniti groaned.

Jagudada was not her own uncle. He was a far off relation; more a kind of respectable elder of the locality where her parents lived than a relation. And before that spring evening five years ago he was to her something like a temple or a townhall or a *kutcherie*—venerable, but distant and largely irrelevant. Then suddenly he had entered her life. Like a whirlwind.

What a low-down creature, she thought. What business did he have to spy on us in the first instance? Oh, the perverse curiosity the man was possessed by! Maybe he couldn't help himself. But once his prurient interest was gratified, couldn't he have quietly made his exit? Did he have to linger there and clear his mean old throat, the old lecher? What on earth was the old billy goat doing in the school compound at that hour, gazing at the stars, eh? Never mind, he might have had his damned reasons. But why did he have to peep though the windows? Oh, the creep, the peeping Tom!

All right, let him show up, she hardened I couldn't care less. I am not flustered.

However, she felt uncomfortable. Jagudada's impending visit brought home the realisation that she didn't really deserve her husband's endearments. The golden girl was not pure gold, after all; there was so much of dross in the precious yellow metal.

She resolved to keep up her spirits at any cost. She crossed over to the mirror and started combing her hair. She hummed a tune and began to think of her husband. Gradually, her spirits revived. She imagined burying her husband with kisses. Yea, she whispered, snuggling up to him, I'm your little golden girl.

Crooning to herself softly, she set about cooking for the visitor. I must take myself in hand, she decided. I mustn't give way. This sinister dark cloud will pass; maybe it'll rain a little, make the path a trifle slushy, but pass it will. And I will be restored to my husband's wonderful world—to its cosy, reassuring warmth.

The visitor arrived. She felt a flash of panic when he cleared his throat.

'Ma,' Jagudada greeted her, handing his walking stick. 'I hope you are all right.'

Suniti nearly screamed: Oh, this man! This menace of kindness! Will there be no respite from this fellow, from his kindness? Kindness, ha! Humbug! It's a facade. It's meanness through and through. The low cunning in his old dead-fish eyes, the eyes that have become more prying with years.

Not even the smallest speck of dirt escapes them. The big booming voice—a voice that hangs palpably in the air instead of fading into silence, something that could be measured as if it were a concrete, tangible object. The greying walrus moustache—wild and ugly. The white handkerchief always jutting carelessly out of his coat pocket like a pencil stub from behind a seasoned shopkeeper's ear. It's awful, this pretence of his being so damn busy that he doesn't have time to dress properly. And that horrible clearing of the throat, as if he's being compelled to speak only as a matter of duty. And, to cap it all, that supercilious Mahatma-like smile peppered with a studied touch of sadness—the sadness of knowing too much. His advanced age, his insidious worldly wisdom; his phony kindness, his utter meanness.

Suniti touched his feet and asked after her parents, Jagudada's wife and other relations. As she arranged in the cupboard the things sent by her mother, the memory of that spring evening Jagudada's kindness had first petrified her flashed in her mind.

. . . Huddled together in the corner of a classroom in the gathering twilight of that wild spring evening, they heard a voice they couldn't place. It was like one heard from great heights or great depths, so faint as to make one wonder if it had been heard at all. The desperate lovers clung to each other more tightly, perhaps to wish it away. Then they distinctly heard someone clearing his throat. Their embrace slackened, their eyes full of fear.

'Who's there?' Suniti asked, mustering her courage.

'Oh, is that you, Suni?' came the unhurried voice. 'Don't be scared, child. It's me—Jagudada. Come out for a second, will you?. . .

What else could anyone have done in my place? Suniti wondered. I can't blame myself.

'I asked your father to come along with me, you know,' Jagadishbabu chatted. 'But is he the type to leave his home and hearth so easily! What excuses—the cows will cry, the family deity will starve, the city climate never suits me, so on and so forth. One crazy excuse after another, by God!

I said, come on, old boy, it's time you look around the world. But he being what he is—content with his home and family deity—why'd he listen to me? That his children are well-settled is enough for him.' He laughed and added, 'Suni, I can't stay long. I've to look up an old party before catching the train. A big business magnate of this place, you know. I won him an important law suit last year. Let me see if I can wheedle something out of this old stinker for our school library.'

Ah, what pretence! Suniti fumed. The good Samaritan, the go-getter, the do-gooder, the benefactor, who must go everywhere, must worry his poor head over everything, for the whole community is his family and every poor soul owes him a debt! Suniti remembered her own debt to him—her enormous, excruciating, painful debt, Can't I ever repay it? Can't I settle it in any other way?

She bristled with regrets. Why didn't I confess before father right away and be done with it? Maybe he would have got mad with me, but so what? I, too, could have got even with him by showing my dumps. Maybe I should have even tried to commit suicide. Father would have sealed himself up in the prayer room for a few days, but in the end the crisis would have blown over and everything would have been all right. Why did I have to incur the debt of this cur?

'I wish I knew you were coming,' she said, hurrying off to set the table.

Jagudada grinned widely.

'I am afraid I couldn't prepare anything special for you,' she apologised, serving him water in a silver tumbler.

She looked after his comforts and listened to his incessant chatter. She hated every minute of it, the terrible torture. Can't I ever pay back the debt? she cried to herself.

'I can't guzzle as much as I used to,' Jagadishbabu droned jovially. 'Getting old, you know. But look at me, I have kept myself fit as a fiddle. Taking long walks every day, you know. Now, my youngest daughter Tonu, you know, the precocious child, she asks me, daddy, why do you carry that stick, can't you walk without it? I laugh and tell her, yes, my little one, I've become old, you see. Suni, you ought to see how she shakes with laughter, that tiny mite. She's five, going on six. Her younger brother will be a year old this December. You haven't seen this child of mine, have you?'

No, she muttered under her breath. I haven't. Nor do I intend to, for heaven's sake. Don't expect me to be interested in the perverse family life of yours. Oh, how could the new aunt let an old lecher like you sleep with

her? Didn't she scream out? How could you go and marry a slip of a girl fit to be your daughter? Wasn't this second marriage of yours hideous?

'Why don't you have a few more rasogollas, Jagudada?' she asked.

Jagudada took one. 'Don't you worry,' he chuckled. I'll be coming frequently. You can stuff me then to your heart's content.'

Suniti's heart skipped a beat.

'Now I know why the rasogollas of this place are so much raved about,' he continued. 'That reminds me Tonu's mother has asked me to carry some home.'

Take, Suniti wanted to shout. Take as much as you want. I'll send the tins by post if you want. But please, please don't drop in here again. I don't want to see your face for the rest of my life.

She knew it was childish—childish and meaningless. Even in case Jagudada stopped coming, his sinister shadow would hover over her. This man is supposed to have saved me from the scandal, she groaned.

. . . Her heart pounded as she came out of the classroom. An unknown fear gripped her. Jagudada stared at her pale face, perhaps figuring out the extent of the affair. She tried to put on an indifferent air, but she knew she wouldn't have been able to stand his scrutiny for long. She would have burst out had he persisted a little longer, but the astute fellow beat her to it. 'Come,' he said, patting her on the back. 'Let's go. I'll take you home. I'll not breathe a word to your father. Nor to anyone else for that matter.'

She did not spurn this assurance and snap back, a fat lot do I bother, Jagudada, go tell it to everyone, I haven't done anything wrong. On the contrary, she clutched at it like a drowning man. Thank God for this reprieve, she thought. I must think everything over. It seems serious. Oh, let me catch my breath and sort out the matter.

'Who else is in that room?' Jagudada asked. 'Bira Nayak, is it? I know, you see. Well, never mind, I am not going to tell it to anyone. You just keep quiet about it, all right? I will take care of everything.'

She had an urge to shout, take care of what, Jagudada, take care of what? What's there to be taken care of?

She felt vastly consoled that everything would turn out fine in the end—her love, her dream, her future.

'Don't you worry,' repeated Jagudada, caressing her shoulder.

They walked past the old gaunt banyan tree near the school; the lovers' messages, true and false, engraved on its trunks; the tea-stall of Mahendra Barik (who used to pinch her cheeks while giving her a free lozenge when

she was a kid and whisper, my little pet, you'll be something when you grow up); the church, its walls green with moss, resounding with the evening bells; the government park, where roses bloomed all round the year; the bathing ghat of Manikma pond and a bunch of young loafers sitting on its steps and braying over something. As a child, whenever she was upset, she wished to drown herself in the blue, ice cold water of the pond.

No one spoke to her, no one seemed bothered about it. It seemed as if the kind-hearted Jagudada had already put in a word to everyone. Maybe that's why all these people are looking at me more with compassion than admonition, Suniti thought.

Finally, that inevitable meeting with her father. But before he could say anything, Jagudada volunteered: 'Suni was walking alone from her friend's place after her studies. I thought I'd better reach her home. Have you finished your evening prayers, old boy?'

Her father did not reply.

'Have you noticed how thin and emaciated you've become, my poor child?' he said, turning to Suniti. 'Why do you have to study so hard?'. . .

For a split second, Suniti thought she was going to cry. But she didn't.

Jagudada finished the tea. Buttoning up his coat, he scanned the room. He seemed to approve of Suniti's stint as a housewife— the clean crockery, the spick and span floor, the framed portraits of good old Mahatma Gandhi and Siva-Parvati.

'Next time when I come,' he said, his voice mellow with the pleasure of bestowing a prize upon a promising student, 'I must bring Tonu's mother along. I'm sure she would love to spend some time with you.' Grinning from ear to ear like a long-lost friend, he continued, 'She quite looks forward to it. Do you know why? For the silk saris of this place! Of course, these saris are now available everywhere, but buying them from here is a different thing. . .'

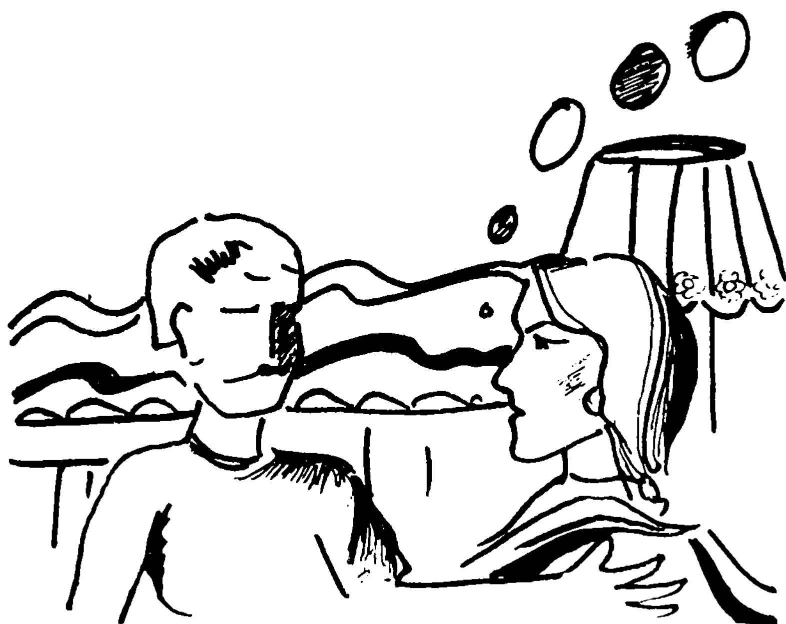
First the rasogollas and now the saris! Suniti braced herself.

'But one thing,' he rattled on. 'I have to take a similar sari for my eldest daughter Jayanti, too. Picking the right stuff for both of them can be quite a job sometimes, you know. And one has got to be so careful. You know why, don't you, Suni? H, ha!' He just stopped short of giving her a dirty wink.

Yes, I know why, Suniti thought bitterly. I know it. Who else would understand your shameless joy if I don't? Your second wife is as young as your eldest daughter, if not younger. And the big large-hearted, just fellow that you're, you wouldn't like to discriminate between them, even in

buying a small thing as a sari. Wonderful! But, Jagudada, have you ever seen yourself in the mirror? I mean, your inner self, your soul, or whatever you call it? If you haven't, then listen to me. I'll tell you. In the light of the day, you're the long black coat, the man about the town; in the darkness of the night, you're a gross body, the body of an animal. Your social work, your legal profession, your maleness! And your kindly detachment! What is it all but your heartlessness, your meanness! To the world at large, of course, you are the complete human being—embodiment of dharma, karma, arth, moksha and what have you! But you couldn't have been a creation of God. No, never! No God could have had the heart to create a man like you. What do you think you're born for—to save the Sunitis of the world?

Suniti simmered. The dark torrents of abuse spewed forth. Now, you old goat, don't gawk at me like that. Don't go on chewing your beastly *paan*, casting evil glance on my house, my little nest. Don't you gloat that all this has been made possible by you. You have nothing to do with it. I will not let your vile shadow darken my skies. Never, never, never! All right, let's face it. Maybe I couldn't have got married to Birabhai, and it's good that I didn't. Maybe the marriage would not have worked out at all. The sheer intensity of love would have put the marriage on the rocks. But



you can't denigrate Birabhai—my first love, my prince. Oh, that noble, sensitive face of his! How I wished he were another Christ and had me cry my life out over his crucifixion! You will never understand the sublime beauty of our relationship. By the way, what do you think you saw that day—what did you see, what did you imagine, you old goat?

Suniti felt confidence rising in her. She looked at the visitor. There, there, how stolidly he sits like an old vulture, patting himself over his success in creating, shaping this world of mine! But I'll destroy his smugness. The fellow has had enough. I'll show him I'm no longer indebted to him, I owe him nothing, I am ashamed of nothing. I will tell him I cherish the memory of Birabhai and those beautiful days. Ah, you poor old man, how I would love to see you jump out of your skin! I'd love to see that, by God, You will wonder, what's gotten into this girl?—could she still. . .?

Jagudada's gaze lingered on the basil plant in the courtyard.

'Dada, how's Birabhai these days?' Suniti asked.

'Who?' He seemed not to have caught on to the question.

Suniti tensed.

'Who, Bira Nayak?' Jagudada paused. 'Don't tell me you still remember him!'

He chewed his *paan* meditatively, smacking his lips, 'Bira? He took his law degree early this year and joined me as a junior. Not doing so badly, you know...'

Suniti was hushed. She had nothing else to ask, she had her final answer. An intense, aching silence engulfed her—the utter silence of the moment when one sees into the heart of light, or of the endless desert.

Jagudada rose. Suniti touched his feet. And amidst the farewell pleasantries, she heard him say: 'I'll come again. Do you hear, child? I'll come again. Maybe right next month.'

His voice seemed to flow into her, in relentless waves, like the refrain from Eternity.

7 THE HUNDRED SONS

The Oriya original "Shahe Puo" is contained in the author's 4th collection "Manihara", published in 1970.

The English version is a translation made by the author and has appeared in "Indian Horizons" (No.3, 1981), journal of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations, New Delhi. A Spanish version entitled "Los Cien hijos" has also appeared in their Spanish journal "Papeles de la India" (Volume 10, No. 1, 1981).

The story has also appeared in several other Indian languages and published as under: (i) Hindi "Sau Bete" in "Aaj Kal" Silver Jubilee short story special, May 1970; (ii) Urdu version in "Aaj Kal", August 1970; (iii) Malayalam version in "Mathru Bhumi Illustrated Weekly", January 1971; (iv) Kannada version in "Karma Veera", July 1971.

The story in its English version stands included in the anthology "Oriya Short Stories", published by Vikas on behalf of the Author's Guild of India Co-operative Society in 1983.

I was suddenly overwhelmed by the sound and fury of youthpower.

Please! let me collect myself! I had never seen you before, so near and all over me, that's why. I might have seen you in processions, convocation halls and gheraos. But had never any occasion to get the feel of your power at such close range, sitting side by side on an wooden bench, having to obtain the smell of your soiled shirts, and chase the flies away with the help of your tattered notebooks on the Constitution of India. Those few hours of my existence come hurtling down the memory lane. . . I remember the tremors. And the brave efforts I made to get past the shocks of intimacy.

Among other things I recall having pitied Gandhari. For didn't I know that she had spawned these hundred sons in vain? That those shabby young men were bound to perish, sooner rather than later, to prove the morals of Mahabharata?

It happened recently. I was travelling to Calcutta on return from leave spent at my native place in Orissa. I live in Calcutta where I hold a job, my office and authority, an ordinary car and a smiling family. So I was anxious to get back to the city, after having spent about a fortnight with my parents and refreshed my roots.

I was travelling by the overnight Puri-Howrah Express. I had allowed myself to suffer the hard planks of a third class sleeper, in the hope that it would be over soon and I would reach Calcutta in the early morning. I had

let it be known, incidentally, to my co-passengers that I would have travelled by air-conditioned first class if it were on official duty; that the leave travel concessions do not apply to short distances, etc. But unlike them I did not find it easy to sleep in peace. Just as I was going to put on the switch and read the time by my watch, yet once again, our train glided into the lights and hubbub of a big station. Kharagpur! Fine! Barely two hours to reach the destination. I got up to smoke a cigarette of satisfaction.

The loudspeaker was carrying on with the sing-song announcements—such and such train on such and such platform will leave—will arrive. . . in Bengali, Hindi and English. What was that? Some wrong words, it seemed, were being conveyed to us in the package. I listened and I was given to understand thus: the Seven Down Puri Howrah Express will leave at four forty-five hours, but there is a possibility of its being detained at Panskura.

Of being detained at Panskura? Where is Panskura? And what exactly does he mean by possibility?

However, I must get ready for the event, I thought. I may have to reveal my identity to the Guard or the Station Master and tell him that I am a senior executive on leave and I have got to go back soon or else. . .

The Seven Down left Kharagpur on schedule and trundled on to Panskura at day-break. The tiny railway station did not appear to be bothered by the extraordinary arrival of an express train. In fact, no one seemed to be in a hurry. The railway officials, frayed coats and all, were surely to be seen on the platform, but there was little movement. Two blue-coated subordinates were holding on tightly to their folded green and red flags, as if they had been asked to defend the non-movement with their lives. The message conveyed to us, I imagined, was that the stoppage was an unalterable fact and the future was not worth a moment's thought.

The train steamed out of Panskura, just as the message was beginning to sink in. But the "cha-wallah", passing on to me the fifteen-paise liquid in an earthen glass, gave a broad grin in the act of running along for his money, and said "It stops again at Mecheda. Kaput". I was not amused.

It stopped indeed at Mecheda—evidently of the same class as Panskura—and continued to stop. The male passengers filled the platform in variegated cottons, barely removed from the comforts of undress, to know and see the fun at first hand. I went past them and asked the nearest station babu for an explanation. "Excuse me", I said, "I am so and so, now could you please tell me why the train has stopped over here?" The questioning was as sharp as I could make it in the circumstances.

The station babu gave the answer in a level tone, bordering on hauteur —

"Gherao in Uluberia."

"What kind of gherao?"

"The workers are squatting on the track."

"Which means, the train is not going to move?'

"Yes sir."

"For how long?'

"Nothing can be said at the moment."

"Not beyond this evening, I suppose."

(derisive smile)

"Nothing can be said at the moment."

Nothing can be said at the moment! If he were asked to declare whether he wished to live or die, the recorded answer would perhaps be the same. The stolid stupidity of the repetition gave me little scope for further action.

I returned to my compartment. The grinning "cha-wallah" was a better specimen, I decided. I could do with a little malice, but not with such wooden bureaucratic behaviour.

I am not suggesting that being a top-level officer I do not share the common failings of bureaucracy. But I am sure I could have done better than him. . . if only I was back in my chamber, with the proper tools.

If only I did not have to be a passenger in a third class sleeper of this god-forsaken train! Leave aside the station babu. Did my khadi-clad co-passenger have to tell me that all big officers of the Govt. ought to be shot? Was the moon-faced trader, sporting a thin gold-chain round his neck, called upon to munch his Kashmiri apples and offer one to me? Did he consider me as part of the starving population? Or, what was worse, had he seen me hunting around in the platform for something to eat, jostling with the crowd for the fast-moving, yet evil-looking *pakoras?* And did the hollow-cheeked terrylene, possibly a civil'servant, have to ask me pointedly whether the matter had been reported to the Home Minister, whether the General Manager had arrived on the scene, etc.? As if he was my big boss and asking for a position paper! Honestly, the way these people were conducting themselves in the face of a crisis, was hardly edifying. . . and I wished I could escape. I remembered the young "cha-wallah" again, almost with affection.

Meanwhile Mecheda had lost all interest in us. The Seven Down had outlived its relevance, not to speak of welcome, with the passage of hours. . . and now it was eleven in the morning. Wild rumours were offered for our consumption after the *pakoras, samosass,* and what have



you, had been sold three times over, and the vendors suffering from an excess of windfall were dozing and carping at each other alternately. Rumours, such as the shootings have started, the army has taken over, the wires had been cut off, etc. were being bandied about. The station babus had retired into unseen caves.

In this situation, when I was thinking, despairingly, of having another bath, the promise occurred to me in a flash. May be I cannot reach Howrah due to the gherao ahead in Uluberia, but couldn't I go in reverse gear to Kharagpur? Wouldn't there be a local train beating retreat from Uluberia or thereabouts?

My hopes were confirmed by enquiries. Thanks! I will now go to Kharagpur and spring a surprise on my cousin sister. I will restore myself with a sisterly lunch and decide on the next course of action. I will contact the proper authorities and take the earliest convenient train to Calcutta after the gherao is lifted.

So, near about noon, I welcomed a Local coming from the opposite direction. Grabbing my suitcase I crossed over to the train as soon as it had

stopped and entered the nearest compartment. I entered and heaved an audible sigh of relief.

It was then that I was treated to the sound and fury, signifying, I hoped, just another slice of experience.

Their number was hardly seven or eight. Their ages would vary between seventeen and twenty-five. But they seemed to articulate with numerous lips and eyes and limbs.

"Sir, would you like to have a glass of cold water?"

Who said that? One or more? These young creatures—no bigger than my own children—were they trying to be funny?

I did not answer and tried to cover them with a grave parental expression. But I was not favoured with any reaction. Nor the hint of a motivation in those limpid luminous eyes. The eyes appeared to be totally innocent of thought, including the wrong kind. I allowed myself to think that I may indeed be looking sweaty and thirsty, and the invitation to drink some cold water may be genuine, after all. I was going to accept the invitation when I found that one of them was exhibiting a pack of cards in the manner of a conjurer, another was mercilessly shaking the torso of his friend in an attempt to say something, and yet another was using the open window to extend and withdraw himself in quick succession, shouting a song-line in some unknown language.

I accepted the offer without further delay and said "Thank you, two glasses please."

Someone placed a cheap plastic water-bottle before me and asked me to go ahead. The gesture carried no courtesy nor elegance. I was reminded of the superior apple passed on to me by the moon-faced trader. The water bears no colour, I told myself, and there was not enough reason to take offence.

A long way to go till Kharagpur. Should I keep quiet all the time? Or, should I start a conversation? They had no doubt acknowledged my seniority by calling me "Sir", but their subsequent behaviour was a complex of movements and sounds I could not understand, far less appreciate.

The train blew the whistle, and a sharp imitative sound was emitted by one of my new companions As if he was a boy of ten entertaining us all with a sense of his "joy and wonder"! That did it. I decided in favour of silence. Unsmiling too, if I could help it.

The train moved. Suddenly someone—dark blue shirt, pock marks on the face and a dusty mop of hair—came closer to me and asked "Sir, do you believe in this gherao?"

I wished I could refuse to answer. For these forty-five years of my life, I had nurtured the delicate plant of my convictions (whatever they were) well within my *sanctum sanctorum*. Did I have to state them for the benefit of this irresponsible youth?

Very well. My reply was unmistakably firm. "No, it only causes suffering to many innocent passengers. . ."

He stopped me with a short burst of laughter. Making it appear that he knew it all along, a familiar piece from my kind of textbook. "Good", he added, "but that apart, do these gheraos help the revolution?'

I was preparing the rejoinder when another yelled at him from behind. "I say, Mantu, your sister was going to be admitted to the hospital,—no? What happened?'

"Nothing. That bastard of a doctor wanted hundred rupees for arranging a bed. As I could not make it, he said there was nothing wrong with her and she could be treated at home."

"So?"

"So, what? If anything happens to my sister. . . you know what I would do. The *dada* of his neighbourhood belongs to our group. Some evening when the fellow would be coming back from the hospital. . ." (the gesture of an inspired stabbing, eyes popping out).

The audience roared with laughter.

I was amazed. To where did they belong? Which species of the human race? They were students, as it appeared from their books and notes, put to various uses. They were like my sons, the younger generation, hope of the nation. . . but how very odd and different! The ones I knew talked sense, spent hours in the library, wrote poetry in moments of tranquil recollection, did social work in patriotic interludes, danced and yodelled in discos for a change, and also did a little revolution— joined the procession, that is, when they were moved. They obeyed the need of balance and perspective, you know what I mean, so that they could pass through the prickly years without damage and attain the adult image, in due course. The proper and pleasant image of success. Like me, for example. But I never knew about these—this sort of young men. What will happen to them?

My dear boys, do you think this life is a big farce? Hardly having shown a little concern for the ailing sister you are over-joyed at the thought of thrashing the doctor! You are shouting, whistling and laughing the moments away like ten-year olds, and yet claim familiarity with the revolution! Having asked me a serious question, you forget I owe you an answer! that I do exist!!

Moreover there was none whose shirt was not crumpled. None whose hair was in place. Some did not even wear any footwear.

Sadly, I concluded that these were the hundred sons. They could not be saved.

Nevertheless I was curious to know more about them. I managed to gather pieces of information through half-answers to my questions and a painful exercise in observing and listening to them while they were engaged in a bewildering variety of occupations, such as, an instant game of cards, palm-reading, reference to the love-life of Mao-Tse-Tung and discussions on the relative merits of different localities of Calcutta in regard to a supposedly bazar delicacy known as *Murhi-Masala.* The main points of my information were:

—they were daily commuters to Calcutta for studies; they had to turn back today from somewhere, thanks to the gherao

—they did not occupy themselves entirely with studies, as they had to do a lot of work for the Party

—they could not possibly stay confined to class-rooms, as they had to do jobs in stores, workshops etc. to support themselves and their parents and brothers and sisters back home (Sir, this is what they do in America, no?)

—they did not study in Calcutta; they went there to earn a living and come back to study in their "own" country colleges.

The facts were not contradictory, but they were bound to be overlapping, for Mantu was different from Sanku, and Sanku was not the same as Santu and . . . For other useful details here goes. Mantu's sister was lying ill for the last six months. Another sister was a clerk in some foreign company, but they were trying to replace her by a chick who had caught the manager's fancy. Five sisters in all. Mantu was not going to marry and bring another woman to the house (stupid!). Sanku—the lean one with moustaches—his father was a moneyed man, had saved five thousand by selling *pan-biri*, but the wretch vanished somewhere with the money. Sanku was not a small chap as he looked, he was once on the point of strangling the principal, when he called him an idiot. Nabeen—the one reading palms—his father was a vaidya, died of cancer. Nabeen told Sanku that he would die in the gallows (damned liar, I will be killed by bullets, by your leave!). Santu was a fine cook, his fishcurry was heavenly (he is a *Bangal*, but you dare not tease him!). His whistling was superb, once the poor policemen were misled and ran the other way. So on and so forth. I hope the picture is fairly clear. Or is it?

Another small bit. They had not eaten anything since the journey began. Not that they did not find eatables at the many wayside stations; they had little money to buy them with. Things would have been different if they had reached Calcutta, as there were arrangements over there for credit and concession, thanks to the Party.

Is there anything left to be said?

The train was stopping at each station, almost every five minutes. There were also the flies. I could not make out why they were so happy with the local trains. Mantu helped me to ward off the flies with more of his note books, but the results were minimal. In due course, I closed my eyes and kept them closed, trying to imagine the comforts round the corner when I would be enjoying the beauty of the lawn in my sister's bungalow in Kharagpur, stretched on an easychair in the balcony. . . and recalling, with faint amusement, the adventure of the past few hours.

The train had barely started to move from one of those stations, when I heard Sanku shouting in his rasping tone —

"There he goes! Shorty!"

I opened my eyes and found him looking out of the window, with others crowded around him. There was an instant communication in smiles and gestures for some call to action, and I found Sanku rushing to the spot where we had the red-rimmed alarm chain, protected by severe warning on the wall against misuse. He started pulling the chain.

Why. . . what! My heart sank within me, but I was fairly vocal. I asked them to stop, even if my voice could not rise above the noise and excitement. They were prodding Sanku in a chorus— Pull! Pull it hard, damn you!

I counted the passage of seconds. Now the train will come to a halt and the railway police will invade the compartment. They will surely question me. . . and then what do I do? Should I tell the truth? hand them over to the police? But they will fight. Oh, my God, I know how these young thugs will fight!

"Please, please" were the words I went on repeating, but they sounded like *mantras*.

May be there was something wrong with the contraption or in Sanku's method of pulling, for the train did not stop. Then he gave up and almost fell upon me to ask—"Sir, give me one rupee, quick!"

I brought out a rupee-note without a moment's hesitation. Sanku secured it in a handkerchief with a tight knot, and sent the object flying through the window. The event was hailed by my companions with a

mighty applause of clappings, whistlings and what have you, including, I suppose, a round of "inquilab. . ."

After they had calmed down. Mantu gave me the brief explanation. "That was Shorty, his right leg is shorter, poor thing. Lives in Khirai and goes to some college in Radhamohanpur. Fool, goes limping like a monkey. . . what are the trains for? Anyway, now that he has got a rupee, he can take a riskshaw or something."

I nodded my head, hoping to understand.

They all got down at Radhamohanpur. Mantu spoke to me, apparently on behalf of the group. "Bye. . . hope we will meet again."

I acknowledged the farewell, and told him inwardly that the question of meeting again would not arise, ever.

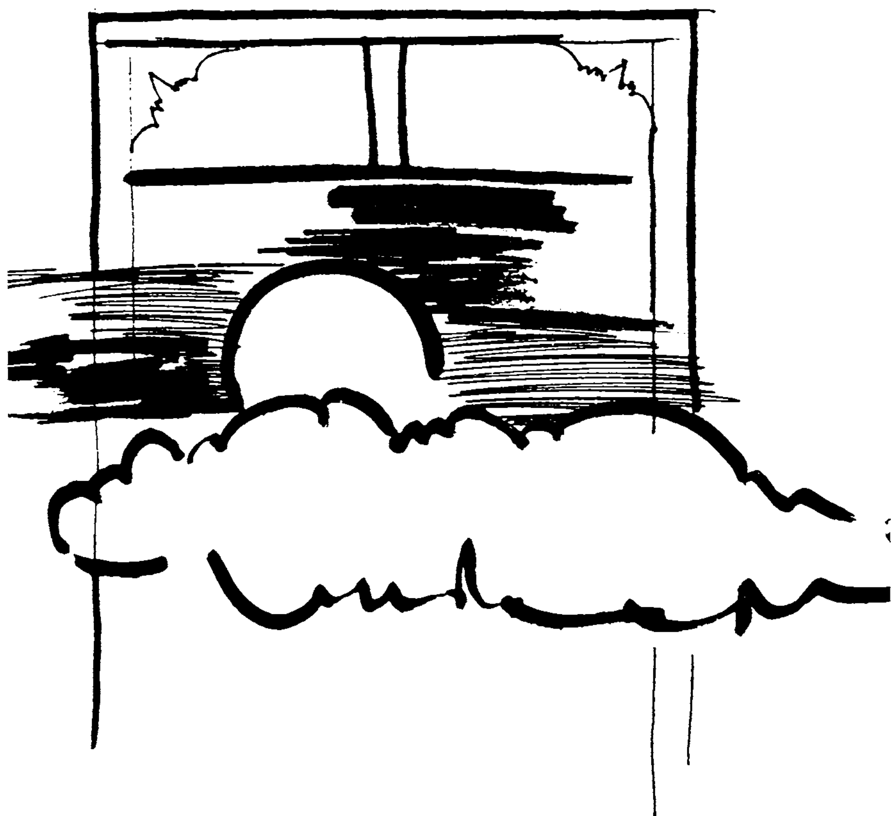
Yes, I have forgotten to mention that a few others of the tribe boarded the train at the same station. One of them, a silent bearded fellow, offered me a rupee before getting down at the next station, and announced "Sankuda' has asked me to give it to you, and say many thanks."

THE MIDNIGHT MOON

The Oriya original "Jaleni" is included in the author's 8th collection "Khelara Nam Ranga, published in 1982.

The English version is a translation made by the author and has appeared in the "Indian Literary Review" (Vol. V No. 3, 1987), edited by Devendra Kohli and Suresh Kohli, and published from Delhi.

The moon does not always appear in the wake of sexual union. But when it does and says "here I come" through the thick curtains of the bedroom, you cannot possibly fail to respond. And say hello with smiles. Tonight Chitra did not stop with this standard gesture. She got up and drew the curtains aside, right through the length of the large window, as if she wanted to make a thorough job of it. Opening could as well be ripping



it open. She came back to her bed and noted that dear husband had fallen asleep, already. As usual. And then she looked at the moon in a direct challenging manner. In a bid as it were to match her pleasure against the heavenly glow, and see if it could attain the intenser status of anger. Please don't move away, she asked the moon, for I have a right to romance around sex, I am a woman too. . don't you remember how I wrote poems when I was a girl?

Come, I pray, come unto me. Permit me to close my eyes and absorb all the blessedness that you can possibly give me.

In point of fact, Chitra did close her eyes and kept them closed. It would be wrong to say that she was not equal to the encounter, that she was overpowered in her lonely night by the grand presence of the planet. Chitra does not consider herself as the weaker sex, and a mere housewife. She can outstare you any time. Some even go to say that the lady is a fighter, and can beat you at any game she likes. While some point to her large luminous eyes, others refer to her formidable tongue. But even the most envious ones respect the might of her looks and language.

Historically, Chitra's personality is forty-five years old. Her eyes are not merely large, they are uncommonly clear. It would seem as if not a speck of dirt that the mind throws about can inhere in there. The godgiven sky is meant to be clear, and so are the eyes. And as regards the expressions of her tongue, the words come out so fast and true in a cascading flow that you can hardly separate peaks from valleys, the bad from the good. The wonder-balls of emotion speed through your consciousness and get lost in the scheme of creation, before you can note them down.

It could be said that Chitra is after all a woman of flesh and blood, given to ugly changes of temper. But it depends on how far you can read those changes into her eyes. And listen to her words and pick out the odd ones like 'damn you!', 'go to hell!', etc. You have to have the necessary will and stamina.

Now in her present state of imbibing the moon, eyes closed, all her expressions had fallen silent, for she was anxious to fill herself with a certain feeling. Except for an occasional sigh, and a consequent tremor of the lips.

Chitra looked beautiful.

Her slim body, the slightly elevated forehead, a finely chiselled nose and firm opulent breasts were silhouetted against the moonlight. One would think that a beauty such as hers must necessarily be granted certain rights and privileges. So if the lady wants to commune exclusively and intimately with the moon on a night of her choosing no man nor god may

deny her the heart's desire. Even the husband does not tire of making love to her night after night in the cause of her happiness,—does he? The midnight moon adds only a new dimension to her claims, that's all.

You may have your way my dear. Nights are by nature silent, and the moon generous, don't you know?

Ofcourse the cricket chirps, the fan whirs, intrepid mosquitoes go on humming, and unknown animals unload their expressions into the night . . and the husband snores . . does not matter, these are familiar sounds that underscore the silence. Some whimperings from the adjoining room. Never mind, I don't have to listen to them, there are others assigned for the job. Chitra refused to acknowledge any obstacle to her desired fulfilment, and sought to draw the moon inside her in a mood of defiance. I must have my fill of the moon in the aftermath of sex, I must, she repeated to herself.

There was another sound that came from a room near the stairs. Chitra was not prepared to accept that it was important either. What can I do about it? I am also a human being like her and a woman too, she insisted.

Couldn't the girl will her womb to behave? Doctor Sahu said the other day that whatever happens to the body is caused mostly by the mind. Therefore she should train and strengthen her mind, so she can have sound sleep and a smooth delivery too, in due time.

Well if she can't make it, who asked her to go this far? Couldn't she use a rubber sheath or something? Or have it operated upon? Why couldn't she?

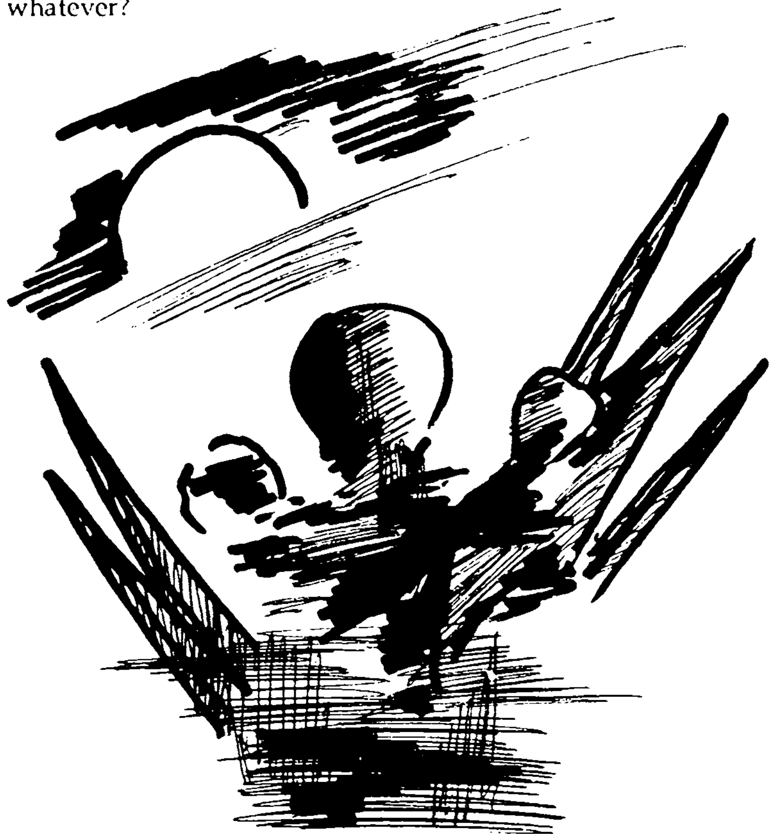
I must steel myself. As otherwise there will be no happiness for me. They will kill it by bits and pieces, the whole lot of them, from Puni to Sankhi apa to Mrs Raut. .

Chitra stopped for a while in her thoughts, to excuse herself, as it were, for a lapse. To shrug off a certain distaste. It was wrong to place my own daughter Puni in the same class as that catty Sankhi apa or the vain fatso Mrs Raut. My daughter is different, anytime better. I had selected the name for her, myself. For on a moonlit night soon after marriage—it was a full moon, not three-quarters like this one—we had met in our bed that still smelt of honeymoon, and had come together in joy. And then we appeared on the balcony to look at the moon . . and we looked and looked till I had the overpowering urge for a wish that this moment must live. In the person of a little one who would belong to us both. And that is what happened. Puni was born exactly nine months later. Puni for Purnima. Sumitra for rest of the world, but Puni for me and me only, to celebrate the secret of a wish that got fulfilled.

My daughter grew fair and beautiful. Did her graduation and married well. But whoever thought she would lose . . lose to death not once, nor twice, but three times in a row?

Chitra got up from the bed. For she felt she must go there right now and stop the nonsense. She shall have a baby, live and kicking, this fourth time, or else. The little one will smile and drool over my clothes—the brat! Yes. Why can't Puni bring a Kuni or Tuni into being just as I did with her? Isn't she a true daughter of mine?

Couldn't I possibly transmit to her a part of my psyche, soul or whatever?



It was not unlikely for Chitra to act on impulse. Move over to her daughter's room and attempt the transmission somehow. But as soon as she reached the corridor open to the sky, the entire physical presence of the moon (scar, pimples and all) seemed to bear down upon her, and she did not like it. This was no romance, but the slimy real, palpable. No cool, but wet and moist. All romance is humbug, a pitiful attempt at escape!

Leaning on the parapet Chitra covered her face with both hands, and wanted to cry, if she could. This is no kin to my moon of those days, can never be!

Bare sex, sex for the helpless. That is what is left for Chitra. Sankhi apa, Mrs Raut, even mother-of-Dhadi, the hag of a washerwoman who would be sleeping now in her miserable hut in the embrace of her man would be getting more to it . . Just then Chitra could hear a medley of sounds, groans and grumblings mixed with oohs and aahs. It was as if all the undesirable sounds in and around the house had conspired to harass her. How dare you leave your bed and seek the moon? Couldn't you rest content with whatever blessings you could gather from the bed?,—they scoffed at her. Not the sounds only, but the soundlessness. A son is sleeping downstairs, and I am made to listen to him also, his inert soundlessness. There is no way out. For I am not merely a wife, but mother to a daughter, mother to a son and I have a father-in-law too.

Chitra looked back at her husband. In angry disdain. Are you man or a machine? Fixed to do the act night after night, and then fall asleep?

Why shouldn't you listen to any sound or soundlessness? And suffer with me?

The sound of a smothered cry topped the groans coming from the adjoining room. As if the person wanted to call somebody but couldn't. Chitra made the gesture of a movement towards the room, but did not go forward. Sorry, she said, firm and clear, regardless of the fact that the party was in no position to hear her. There is somebody else to look after you, she added inwardly. If it comes to that I will go back to my bed and husband—understand? Sex or love or whatever, I will keep clinging to him. No one has the right to say no. But Chitra did not return to her bed. She was not prepared yet to admit defeat. I have risen for now, I wish to be myself. Enjoy myself, if you will. So let the sounds came, one and all, I can take them on. I shall look at the moon, wet and moist as if may be. I am not young after all, pushing forty-five you must know ..

Chitra persisted thus, but forgot to notice the moon for a while.

Instead she looked down and below at the houses of those others. Buildings small and big, and huts too, the shabby closing-in of a small town. There is that house of Jameswar Mohapatra, the presswallah that keeps on rising high and still higher. A couple of steel rods seem like poking into the night, presuming to tease the hoary ancient. The smaller gray one that belongs to Basu babu, retired Collector. The roof abounds with flower pots, squatting like frogs, not a single flower in them. Ram babu's house, burning a midnight lamp somewhere, to show that the

lawyer is struggling devotedly in the cause of his client. And that tiny one of school-master Bhobani, blue frontage inscribed with a cement-concrete "Shri" in vermillion, supposed to be artistic. The wife's name is Sankhi apa, some remote relation, who smiles superior as if her husband is no mere school-master but a professor or something. You won't like them, they are literature—she says, when I want to see the books in her shelf. Doesn't she know that she looks like a witch? That while my ordinary husband makes love to me every night her master babu won't bother to take her even once a year? . . they're all upstarts, mediocres, small-timers, all these houses and their masters. My house, that is the house of my famed father-in-law Apurba Mohanty, retired Chief Engineer, is the most aristocratic of them all. The faded yellow two-storeyed houses that has stood there for ages, hasn't cared to grow nor diminish nor put on a paint. For it does not matter if you look like the Vindhyas or Himalayas, so long as you bear a name and can hold your head high.

So God bless my man, Pranabandhu Mohanty, son of the great so-and-so, and let him hum the cinema songs, chew umpteen *pans* stuffed with scented zarda, never mind if he stays put in that small bank job and whatever happens to his children . . and grant him his nightly dues!

"Oh, my mummy!!" Now he breaks out in words. Looks as if he can't control it any more. My great father-in-law Apurba Mohanty, retired Chief Engineer is invoking the help of his mother, as otherwise he will have to pee in the bed. Go ahead! You have had your dues, name and fame and riches, and now you are old. Old as old can be. What more do you ask of life? Naba, your servant-boy won't get up, he hardly does. So what? What can I do about it? Take it that I am also asleep, I can't hear a thing.

My daughter, my son—have they been given their dues?

That banyan tree over there. The birdlings are screeching and screaming, for a snake has got into their nest. The children shall sleep no more, for the night belongs to snakes.

No, it does not. The human children deserve a better fate,— don't they? Mother-of-Dhadi, the washerwoman has dozens of them, stinking snivelling brats. But they laugh and play and grow like nobody's business. Her boys will run dry cleaners when they grow up, dangling cigarettes from their lips, and talking in high fashion like Amitabh Bachhan. Yes, the boys are odd wonderful things! Seems as if they grow by an inch every day when they get up from their night's sleep. Ready to do yet another round of the world, and brandish a few more kicks and fisticuffs in joy. They do not grumble and groan at night. The boys grow to be fathers. Chitra smiled as he thought of her boy's father and the pleasure he demands of his nights . .

I will tell it all to my Debu, why shouldn't I?

I will tease him. May be in double entendres, so they would both know, father and son, but act innocent. My son will slink away smiling at the carpet and release himself in the bed room with his young wife. The gay dog! Like father, like son.

Suddenly she had the feeling that all the sounds of the night had stopped. They have heard my thoughts, and have stopped to hear more,— the incredible lie, the delusion that Chitra feeds herself with. And now the moon looks askance at me! Does not ever smile, lest I may take it amiss.

The moon is being kind, is it? Or does it mimic my son? his vacant looks and dumb silences? I don't care! My son is not an idiot. I mean he is not going to remain thus. He will go to school and then to college. And he will marry and bring a bride home, more beautiful than his mother. And then I will tease him . .

There were two things that happened together at this point of time which started Chitra from her thoughts. The moon dropped rudely behind the trees. And there appeared at the doorway of the room to the left, Apurba Mohanty, the old father-in-law trying to bring his dhoti back in position, but with not much of a success. Though the moon was in hiding its light was good enough for his ugly shrivelled nakedness.

"Please wait!", she cried out and rushed to his side. And wrapped the dhoti around him as best as she could.

"Why did you come out? Wasn't there an urinal in your room? Or you could have called Naba—" Chitra's tone was not too sharp for admonition, but she hoped it would shame the old man to understanding.

Apurba Babu waited till the dhoti was in place, and began stumblingly, "Naba won't listen . . Naba does not listen . . That day—"

The answer was incomplete. But Chitra had no patience to hear him through. Better take him to the bathroom and be done with it. She placed her hands around him and tried to make him walk. His gout is getting worse, and then this other disease, the painful urge to pass urine from time to time. I know, and so we have left you with your own cave, your urinal, your Naba . . who asked you come out? Why couldn't you leave me to my thoughts, my sorrows, my own doings with the moon? Chitra cursed him inwardly, but tried to make him walk faster, and finish the job, the soonest.

But she found that the old man was not prepared to walk. What happened? If you are that disabled why did you . . Chitra was on the point of asking him straight, respect be damned. And then she noticed that he was not merely static. He was looking intently at the sky, while the moon was peeping and winking at him from within the thick foliage.

It was exasperating, and you could not blame Chitra if she were to utter the swear words, regardless of whether Apurba Babu could hear and understand them. However she was spared the trouble, for he put a foot forward and promised to walk. Chitra heaved a sigh of relief. Like a practised astronomer she scanned the night-sky and assured herself that there were still many hours to go before day-break, plenty of time to get past this stupid charade.

While walking, Apurba Babu tried to release his left hand from the grip of her arms, and before Chitra could make out his motives, she found the boney parchment of a hand groping around her tresses. Seeking as it were, suitable place to register his blessings.

What's that? Chitra moved aside. She could not release herself entirely, but she hoped he would realise . . that I don't need your blessings, thank you.

Chitra avoided being too close to the father-in-law and yet make him walk, as he should, while she allowed the free flow of resentment inside her . . How dare you bless me? What have you given me over all these years? I entered your house as a bride, when I was bubbling with youth. And your son made love to me. So what? Any son of a father would have done the same. Ate well, wore silk and slept under a concrete roof—no different from when I was living with my parents. The women in all these houses you see, including Sankhi apa are no strangers to such "happiness" . . . But Chitra was disturbed by his mutterings, the audible portions, that is—They can't do it. No one can hold me like you. . That Naba! Naba is a rogue . . And our Pran is such a bumbling (hi - hi) . . you know what happened that day? . .

Save the flattery, will you? And the trivial talk of how your son was once trying to do this job and bungled, fell down himself, poor boy, chuckle, chuckle, as if it is the funniest episode in the history of man.

Listen to me! It is twenty-five years since I got married to your son, and the progress achieved by the family is as under: Your son has grown a big tummy. Three rooms added to the inner courtyard. A tube-well sunk into the old hole of a well. You have grown old and older and gathered more of these diseases. Anything else?

(Our Pran is always like that: Sleeps off while reading. Rolls off while eating, when I was in Baripada . .)

Big deal: Why wake up when you have to sleep? Why wake up to do the act? And make your wife reap the consequences? Yes, my daughter looks at me accusingly—Tell me mummy, it is you who have to tell me, none else, for you have given birth to me, you have given me in marriage . . tell

me . . why can't I bear a child? Of the three, only one had come out alive, had cried and wetted my clothes, but she did not last beyond a day. But why? Why?

Now may I know if you and your son have bothered to read into her eyes? And suffer the questions, the anguish of a mother?

(Naba is a real rogue. Had Pran's mother been living she would have packed him off long back . . slow, slower, it hurts . . thanks, you know the trick, none but you .·. a little tighter please . .)

"A little tighter please!" Chitra mimicked to herself. You want me to embrace you or what? And are you going to take all night to walk from the bedroom to the bathroom? Chitra was all the more peeved, when she found that the old man was again looking at the moon.

It seemed to Chitra that he was not exactly looking at the moon, he was listening. Listening to what? The snores of your son? For you can hardly hear the groans . .

(Is Diwali over? Remember how Debu got scared last year and came to sleep with me? Debu does not come to me these days, does not care for his grandpa . .)

Don't talk about my son, I am warning you! My son shall not go anywhere near you. He was not behaving this way before Diwali last year. They don't believe me. My precious husband laughs at me when I say so. But I know. He was not howling and whining like an animal as he has been doing since then. Not grinning like a . . like an (idiot). And the specialist doctor did not look so worried earlier. No! My son is not a congenital idiot. It is you people who have made him so . .

My son does not stare at me accusingly. He does not have to. Didn't I tell you that he will grow to be a man, marry and bring a beautiful bride home?

(Debu is a nice boy. May God. .)

Stop it! Don't bless my son!

Chitra did not shout the words, but her reaction in those terms was so violent that her hands slipped off the frail body of Apurba Babu and he fell down, almost. And said plaintively— don't leave me .. my dear .. my mother. But Chitra told him inwardly that she was not amused. It is the unkindest cut of all, she said, while pulling him up, I am not a mother to you, shall never be . .

And then, strangely, she cried. She could not hide the shame with her hands as they were not free, and was hence compelled to smother her tears on the shoulders of the old man. Apurba Babu sought to console

her—Don't worry my dear . . nothing has happened to me . . I am telling you. Chitra suffered.

Suffered and gave up—I am beaten. The whole family from the very old downwards are determined . . to deny me happiness or the like. But I can't quit . . they won't let me . .

So Chitra did not want to think any more about Puni or Debu. No use. This stretch from bedroom to the bathroom is the road I have to travel, till eternity. And burn all the way.

She walked in slow halting steps with Apurba Babu in her arms and had to listen to his mutterings, half-notes of words buried under grunts and chuckles. And sensed that there was a night outside, living its own life, articulating as it might. The light in Rambabu's house has gone out, some dry bough of a palm tree falls off with a theed, some child cries out, no child of Sankhi apa for she is barren, a star is grounded, and the moon. . to hell with the moon!

She could not hear all the words of the old man, and understand them less. But it did not take her long to realise, that he had grown awfully old, his memory was in shambles. He talks excitedly of the time when I fed him with delicious pancakes, stuffed with nuts and raisins. God knows if I made them. Curses some Nalu apa, never heard of her. And goes on stroking me here and there. Gently, but clumsily. Let him! Asks if Puni's daughter has started going to school, chuckles over the prospect of marrying her. And says over again that Debu is a good boy, he will tell him the story of a golden ghost. He thinks, Chitra realized, that Debu is still a child . . but that is so, my dear God, that is indeed so . .

The bathroom at last. Apurba Babu wanted to shut the door for the sake of modesty, but Chitra won't let him. She begged him, so to say, not to torment her any more, for there was every chance of his slipping on the wet surface.

She kept standing near the doorway and suffered the sound of the process, the stilted senile stream. Never mind, she told herself, the moon is dead anyway.

The journey back from the bathroom could have taken the same time or less. But midway Apurba Babu said—Wait! and he stood looking at the sky.

Let be, let it be. Chitra did not stop him. But she was surprised and annoyed that the moon which was supposed to go down under and die had re-appeared. Not peeping through anymore, but facing you squarely. Facing the old man, that is. And it seemed to her that the three-quarters

moon was indeed full, full for him alone. Beaming as it was with the effulgence given to a complete lover.

And the old man was looking on—as if the moon belonged to him! But what does he seek to find? the image of his dear departed mother-of-Pran? or some luscious moment lost in memories?

Chitra was more and more surprised as the session continued. But she could not rouse herself to anger. Rather she was fascinated to see how the face of the old man was transformed. All the lines and wrinkles had vanished, or so it seemed. And the pale appeared serene, as though there was little difference between losing and gaining the world; there was always this paradise. He was bound to the moon in modes beyond romance . .

Chitra had a feeling of emptiness after she had put her father-in-law back in his bed. As if the journey should not have ended so soon, and she should have continued to hold the old man in her arms, and walked the interminable steps. And listened to his prattle. She should have burnt more . . and more . .

Yes, that is what my life is meant to be. To burn through, slowly, cracklingly (laughingly), in punctuations of pain and ecstasy. No sympathies please, I like it. Could the old father-in-law have made himself to the moon and relived a moment of happiness but for me? So keep my son an idiot if you want to, deny my daughter a child if you will, but let me burn, my dear God, for someone or something . . all the time . . so there is no chink for thoughts and sorrows.

On coming back to her bed, the husband spread his arms again around her, to make it for the second time, she supposed. Yes, take me, she said, I won't say no to that either . . I shall burn.

9 THE HILLS

The Oriya original "Pahada" is included in the author's 6th collection "Nali Gulu Gulu Sadhaba Bohu".

The English version is a translation made by the author and has not been published so far.



I wish I did not have to tell this story of my shame. Of Shame unbounded. But I cannot help it. For I have to release myself of the burden. And yes, I have also to write a reply to her letter. Reply, my foot! I am going to tear

that letter to bits, and then put it to flames. But the story has to be told anyway, the story of a despicable night. It is only then that I can rest in peace, and assure myself that the dark night is dead and gone, beyond recall.

It concerns the two of us. A young man linked to a young woman. We are rebels. We love to kick at the hypocrisies of the bourgeois society, and revel in the damage done. Nanda Mallick was ofcourse given to her long and strange silences, and she had not been too explicit about her world-view. But what matters is that it was a deliberate plan hatched by both of us—to enjoy sex together in a secluded bungalow somewhere in the Himalayas. Maybe she did not confide in me about her intentions in so many words. But, dash it, we were intelligent enough to understand such feelings about each other. We didn't have to spell them out.

We had been rolling and lolling in the Calcutta *maidan* on many a mellow evening over four months, before setting out for the hills. I had told her all about my family—from the patrician papa to the "phoren" aunt acquired from Germany. She was an attentive listener, and had responded often enough with her brilliant flashes of smile, sparkling teeth and all. But I had not insisted on her telling me everything about herself. The poor girl belonged to a deprived family, and had qualified herself somehow to be a teacher. What funfare could she serve after all, with that sort of a background?

I had showed her the revolutionary profile of my person, glowing in hate and anger. She had noticed it for sure, and had favoured me with her smiles. Which had excited me, once in a while. Now, why shouldn't that be enough material for sex?

In a broader sense she was not really different from others. From those other working girls of the metropolis, who were living some sort of a life in their hovels, doing a job to sustain the family, and were happy to have a good time in their spare moments with a boy-friend of the privileged class. . . seeking outlets of joy within the dimensions of hate and anger.

Except for a special feature. The consummation could well have taken place in the backyard of a tea-shop, the shadows of a mound of garbage, or the bye-lane of a lane. Whereas for over four months we did nothing but roll on the grass of the *maidan*. She won't allow me to go any further. So we went on tearing into the green-gray blades of grass. Treated ourselves routinely to those plebeian and supposedly herbal lozenges offered by hawkers. Clutched at the fragments of fiery speeches wafted in the evening breeze, like they were some delectable weaponry to be used against the society at a suitable opportunity. And she smiled when I added

to them my own swear-words. But that was all. Ofcourse she puckered her lips (didn't she?) when I happened to get somewhere near her face, in the sweep of my emotions. Again when I placed my hand on her dark and rounded arms, she gazed, for no reason, at the sunset. In short she seemed to acknowledge, with thanks, the macho image projected by me. So much so that sometimes she appeared to shrink from the white heat of my personality, and sought to hide her face. However she did not like to leave the *maidan* for somewhere else, for a more intimate dialogue. And she used to say when it grew dark, "It's getting late. I must go home now". Yet, significantly, she did propose fumblingly on a certain evening, "How about going to the hills, sometime during the summer holidays?"

The flush on her face gave her away. I got the message that she would like to celebrate the consummation on the misty indented heights, rather than on the flat surface of the plains. Very well. I had to accept the fascinating contradictions of the female psyche. I had read in some English book that a certain lady preferred to mate with her man on the hard floor under the bed, ignoring the soft mattress on the top. So no questions please, I told myself. Do the duty of a male. And, after all, if your so-called love can be multi-coloured, why can't you grant the same privilege to sex? I thanked Nanda Mallick inwardly. And made preparations for ascending the hills.

Somehow or other, I could prevail on my papa to part with a small portion of his vast surplus to help me with an unspecified activity of research in the Himalayas. And then I told her that the financial angle had been taken care of, and we could now proceed, if it suited her. But I was taken aback when the school- maa'm brought out a wad of currency notes from her vanity-bag, and placed it in my hands. Pleaded that I must accept the little savings she had nurtured and set apart for the journey. Furthermore, she advanced the strange logic that while she did not mind my spending on her at Calcutta, she was anxious to do the spending over there, on the hills. Her lips trembled, believe me, when she asked me thus, as if it would break her heart if I declined.

Well, I need hardly say that I yielded to her whim,—yet another piece of the feminine mystique that I had to respect, or else. And eventually we boarded the Darjeeling Mail on a steaming hot day, posing as a married couple, among many others, out on a summer flight to the hills.

You must have gathered by now that Nanda Mallick was quite an ordinary woman. A working girl with modern sensibilities and all that, but nevertheless an ordinary piece of goods in terms of feminine assets. In fact, I had never considered her as beautiful. Languid eyes. Fleshy lips. And a body that must be considered dark and heavy, by aesthetic standards.

Furthermore she was not inclined to verbalize, and that was not my idea of a charming company. But she smiled. And the smiles were more than brilliant flashes. The dark body heaved, like the ocean that tends to swell, so as to give you a bare indication of its depths and plenitude. Perhaps that was what really provoked me to get there, past the treasure islands, coral reefs, killer whales, or whatever. However I must set the record straight. She was not beautiful. How could you possibly say so in respect of a person who was not fair nor slim, and did not glow nor sparkle like the average heroine?

Pity, I can't recall that odd moment. Just when exactly, during our ascent by the toy-train to Darjeeling, that she "became" beautiful. Was it when she said that the Teesta river was snaking up in a heart-to-heart lovingness for the hills, whereas our train was scampering upwards like a centipede? When she said that the pine trees stood out like so many tall hermits among the worldly masses? When she stretched out her hand to touch the fluttering white flags which carried the message of Buddha? Or was it when she closed her eyes just as a cloud passed over her, and then looked at me in wide-eyed wonder, like as if she has had a visitor from heaven?



At what precise moment did she startle me with the suggestion that she was indeed beautiful? And asked me to realise, as it were, that she was more than a mere woman?

I fell into a doubt by the time I reached Darjeeling. An absurd doubt. As if Nanda Mallick had been transformed. She was looking at me from some distant horizon, she was speaking to me over sound waves from a remote star. But surprisingly she was not disposed to leave me alone. For she was anxious to tell me about some strange and wonderful things, and to render herself more and more beautiful (as if), before she could release me.

It is ridiculous, I told myself. We belonged to a decent society. I was the scourge of an affluent family, And she was the provider-goddess of a deprived one. Between us we believed in the revolution, roast chicken, and the historic need to appease hungers of all kinds. We talked about the concrete facts of life and society over herbal lozenges. I mean I did the talking while she listened. All this was happening only the other day. So what was all this nonsense? What could possibly have happened to this woman in Darjeeling?

I treated her that evening to roast chicken in a restaurant in the Mall. I noted the spread of satisfaction on her face when she bit into the white meat. And I thought she would have looked just the same, if I had compelled her to dine with me in a restaurant at Calcutta.

I thought I must kiss her to-day in Darjeeling, a thing that I could well have done at Calcutta, if I had dared.

I thought I must mate with her tomorrow, a thing I could well have done..

Before finishing her dinner she said suddenly from out of the blue, "Did they have to tie up *Pagla Jhora*? Couldn't they have taken the railway line through a different route?"

It took some time for her words to sink in. That the *Pagla Jhora* was no criminal, but a bubbling and gurgling mountain-stream that we had passed on our way to Darjeeling. And then I felt like snubbing her. All this sympathy for a piece of earth and water, but none that you could summon from within you for the poor *Lepcha* and *Bhutanese* toilers of the hills? Couldn't the numerous lines of pain carved on their faces do something to you sensitive feminine soul? However I failed to speak out. For her face assumed an unusual glow. Yet another expression in beauty, it seemed to me. As if the impetuous *Pagla Jhora* had come to rest and be at peace in the wide little expanse of her eyes. That made me all the more determined that I must kiss her to-day.

Somehow I was glad that it had been cloudy since we came, and so we could not get a glimpse of Kanchan Jangha. Nanda Mallick had been denied the pleasure of a supposedly wonderful sight.

That evening my heart missed a beat or two, after I had closed the doors of our room in the hotel. Was I getting nervous? A little too anxious? Any way I sought to laugh it away. Surely an amusing piece of feeling to be noted by my co-conspirator. That these were the classic jitters of a bridal night. Prelude proper to the scheduled event. To-day's item was the appetizer: The Kiss.

Well, let me tell you briefly that I could not kiss her, after all. For she kissed me. God knows what she saw through the window, when she bounced back and planted a long long kiss on my lips. But when I sought to respond, and do something or other, she stayed my hands with an unwonted vigour. And said,—No, not to-day. Not tomorrow. May be a day later, when we would be staying at that bungalow on the hills.

I could hardly imagine that she had been stung that badly by the bug of Romance or whatever. But it was useless to protest. So I slided into sleep in due course, like an obedient pupil.

The sun came out pretty late on the following day. So there was no question of joining in the tourist rush for the Tiger Hill, at an unearthly hour, to observe some rare splendour of Kanchan Janga at sunrise. I offered my sympathies to Nanda Mallick. And persuaded her to have a leisurely breakfast and then come out with me to do the sights of the Darjeeling town.

Nanda Mallick agreed to my proposal. But somehow I felt that my sympathies were lost on her. She had that happy and secretive look about her, as if she had the gem of a happening nestling in her ample bosom, which she would reveal at the proper moment.

We did quite a thorough job of Darjeeling on that day. Upper Mall, Lower Mall, various gardens and orchards, several zoos—one of them prompted her to say that she would like to have a tiger-cat for a pet—and wanderings among the tall and majestic conifers, pines, cedars, poplars, birches etc. But I asked her to note the other sights too, outside Nature. The miseries of the poor. I pointed out to her the stark contrast between the Upper Mall and the Lower Mall, the fur-coats and the rags, and hoped she would read the warning in between the lines: Remember! The debts we owe to the enormous hurts and hates we have gathered unto ourselves over all these years for the sake of History. The soil that sustains the flora and fauna of my personality and yours. And the soil that provides the heat. The holy heat that would help us to the intenser sex in the special heights of some Dak Bungalow you are enamoured of.

Wait and see. Just a couple of nights away from to-day. When the flames of our grand passion would purify the gold in us, for greater service to the Cause, in the days to come.

We were back to the hotel in the afternoon, and I stretched myself on the bed for a well-earned rest. But she was hardly disposed towards any such indulgence. The first thing she did was to open the window that opens out on the hills, and watch those interminable clouds playing with a laggard sun. And then suddenly she let out a cry—or was it a scream?—that brought me to my feet. "Kanchan Jangha!", she shouted in a delirious fit of joy, and dragged me to the window. "There they are", she said, pointing at the all-too-familiar array of peaks clad in white. "Just as I had seen them", she added, "in the darkness of the night yesterday. Five of them raising their heads together,—gold in one, silver in another, and gems and grain and armaments in the three others, the five treasure-houses of the King. You follow me?"

I suppose I should have told her then and there to stop all this nonsense. But the stupid woman did not give me a chance. For she was too near me, and her new-found beauty was overpowering, if you know what I mean.

Perhaps that was the moment when I lost my moorings. I was carried helplessly into her orbit, body and soul, for whatever was in store for me.

Darjeeling could atleast help me with sight of real men and women. So I could point them out to her, as reminders of the struggle that must never cease. But the next day when she took me out of the town on a route among the hills and valleys, following the map furnished by some friend of hers, I could not even see any people. There were no doubt a few here and there, but they did not seem real. They looked like so many slaves of Nature, albeit devoted, who were happy to be just there, to be part of an awesome vastness. . to live the life bestowed on them, kindling a tiny hearth to provide warmth for their masters, a hearth that sent out a wisp of smoke like some timid overture to those above, hoping it would reach the heights sometime somewhere—never mind if it looked, at that moment, like losing itself in the haze that surrounds the Kingdom.

Hills, and nothing but hills all around you in a grand celebration of some cosmic event, in numerous shades of green and blue, gray and gold, and in bewildering postures of love, laughter and haughty shamelessness, as if this world was truly at their feet. . but yielding suddenly to a call to intimacy when you touched them.

No, we did not touch them really. But so it seemed, going by the currents that passed down the spine, every now and then.

I feared that Nanda Mallick was not going to recover from her silences. As if she had made a gift of her words, among other things, to those demon-gods. However I hoped it was not a total surrender, her femaleness and all.

Mongpu went by, and then Kalimpong. And then the rivers Teesta and Mahananda that appeared to display their charms over and over again, the little flirts as they were. But where on earth was the Dak Bungalow?

Where was that Dak Bungalow, the projected peak of our desires, thanks to my deluded lady-love? The super-cottage where I am scheduled to possess her within the closed doors of a room, and with the windows shuttered too, so we may not see the damned hills, any damned bit of them?

Suddenly she asked the taxi to stop near a non-descript *Jhora.* And then led me up a mound, hand in hand, beyond the stream. In a few moments she clutched my hand, and said in a hushed undertone—"Look! There it is, our Dak Bungalow!"

At first sight I could not figure out the special claims of this Dak Bungalow to beauty, greatness or whatever. A small wooden structure surrounded by tall trees. A totally dishevelled garden, with some intrepid wild roses peeping out from within the thick shrubbery. A big black Labrador. It barked at us for the sake of form, and then went back to its den. And an old Nepali Chowkidar. After a smart salute he informed us that he had received orders from the *Burrah Sahib,* and all arrangements had been made for our stay here tonight. I did not ask for the name and address of the *Burrah Sahib,* nor did I try to find out how Nanda Mallick could possibly have a hold over the minions of the Establishment. But it pleased me to know that she was indeed a modern young woman, and she could do things if she wanted to. So when I repeated saying "Wonderful!" the praise was indeed addressed to her resourcefulness, and not to the merits of the bungalow.

But when I stood at the entrance of the bungalow on one of those rough-hewn steps, I realised why Nanda Mallick had chosen this spot for a special experience. And why she appeared to take my fulsome praise in her stride, with the bare hint of a smile, as if there was nothing surprising about my reaction. For her the wonderful aspect was bound to be in the vaunted scenery, and here the scenery was indeed a paean to the hills. We were not now at the foot of the hills, nor at the top; we were inside and among them. Their large-scale eyes were fixed on us in an unrelenting stare, and their warm and humid breath was upon us.

I did not like to stand there any longer and be obliged to see them. But the feeling grew in me that they would still be there when the doors and windows are closed. Let them,—I could not care less!

However I found it hard to resume reading my unfinished fiction, in the safe haven of my room. The smells, sounds and colours, the entire works,

of those mighty beings ranged outside the cottage crowded in on my consciousness. And the million sylvan stirrings on their person spoke to me of a thrill that I could not get away from. A thrill heightened by the anguish of a lonely tree somewhere shedding its leaves, the desperate cawing of a bird lost in the valleys, and somewhere a streak of smoke, and a slice of silver—the tiny little articulations that sought pitifully to break loose from the eternal. The awesome eternal. I felt as if they were going to possess me, the lonely and unlovely individual, and reduce me to yet another streak of smoke or a slice of dirty silver. .

No, no, no! I banged my fist on the table. I shall always be as I am, my own true self, angry and individual. And she must suffer for this confusion. . and enjoy it, I am sure. Just a few hours from now.

I do not recall if the window was open at night, inspite of me. Anyway the body of Nanda Mallick was lying on the bed, visible and vulnerable in all its female dimensions.

Silently I placed my hand on her. She took it in hers and placed it gently on her soft rounded breasts. And then I stretched myself on her and kissed her.

I kissed her. I kissed her lips. I kissed her on the cheeks, under the ears, and on the arms. More and more, I told myself. And so I disrobed her in feverish haste, and kissed her at many other places. But still I felt that it was not enough.

Forget the kisses. There were other things too. The nails and the teeth . .

But my limbs failed me. The sword remained stuck in the scabbard. I kept on embracing her, close as close can be. But I could never get into the act. I just felt like merging myself in her. Like as if her dark body had come alive, in a mighty ground-swell of love, that of a mother who calls out to her long-lost son.—Come, Come my dear, deep inside me. And throw it away, that ugly useless sex. It is such peace courting death, so much better than the angry thrust, the killing.

I slept through the barren night. She did not allow me to move away from her.

So this is the story of my shame—need I say more?

On coming back to Calcutta, I had kept away from her. And now I get this letter. The punch lines run like this:

I could realise on that beautiful night how great you are. You are not my lover, but my man . .

The school ma'am tries to be clever, you know. Tells me, in other words, that I am impotent, a no-good shrimp of a man. I will give her a fitting reply. Damn it, I will tear the letter to bits and then burn the bits to ashes. I shall never again get anywhere near her body, dark and dense and fatal . . like one of those hills.

LIVING WITH KRISHNA

The Oriya original "Chhakadira Sri Krishna" is included in the author's 11th collection "Trayovinsha Mrutyu", published in 1987.

The English version is a translation made by the author and has not been published so far.



I

The *Tribhangi* pose that brings the three spheres together. The enchanting flute. The peacock plume that crowns your head. And above all, that exquisite smile! As if the mystery of life and death is but a romance which is known only to you, and so can be transmitted to one who can get close to you. Excruciatingly close. The poor devil may get burnt all over, even as she is entranced, but that is precisely how she would know. May be some Gopika of a girl is not swooning into your arms. But that hardly troubles you. You would still be smiling and teasing and tempting her - "Won't you come, my dear? You don't really think you can keep away from me, do you?".. But there is a limit to how cruel you can be, my lord! Please don't forget that I am not that vulnerable. Of course I have always been a loner. I could never make anyone my very own. Not even my parents, husband, and my only child, not to speak of others. You may think that things are even worse with me now, for I am living the lonely life of a widow, my daughter is far removed from me, my so-called friends have left me, and I am not as sprightly as before. Nor am I too fond of painting or singing, these days. And so Srimati Suruchi has nowhere to go. She is bound to cry out for you, and ask to be taken to your bosom. So goes your reasoning - no?

Wrong! That's completely wrong! Suruchi does not consider herself to be helpless. Has never ever. Loneliness has always been a point of honour with her, a distinction conferred on her by birth. And yet she comes to you every morning and evening, for an intimate piece of conversation - you know why?

Because I am tickled. I feel like playing a ball-game with you. A make believe of falling for your grand lies. I am tempted, that is, to tease you for your godhood. But pray, who else could I play with? There is no human being, stupid as they all are, who is worth the effort. And there is no so-called truth that is not obscene. So I must have you as my playmate, - a tribute to my superb sense of humour, don't you see? And so it's you who should get closer to me, my love.. my black prince.. you can't keep away from me, can you?

Thus did Suruchi Mohanty, the widow of late Aswini Mohanty, a former senior officer in the Forest Dept, converse with her Krishna on her lonely mornings and evenings. With a two-feet tall Krishna who was growing so very alive and interesting every passing day. She had a crawling baby for her Krishna at one time. But she came to realize that he was a little too small to appreciate the nuances of her language, the undertones of love and anguish, and what have you. So she got an adult Krishna brought for her by the P.A. to her husband. The poor man had no end of troubles, she recalled, in getting the right one for her. A funny name he had! She could not remember it though.

She was amused to recall how she used to point out the blemishes of the many Krishnas he brought for her from time to time, after painstaking enquiries and trips to far-off places - Look! Do you think Krishna flaunts such a broad smile as this? ..May be he is the black god, but he is not that sort of black, like a piece of charcoal - is he? But the fellow used to take it all in his stride, as if he was destined to cater to the whims of a wilful queen!

Anyway this one is flawless, she decided for the umpteenth time. That cute baby of a Krishna was still there, relegated to a corner of the platform, and it was looking at you shamefacedly, caught as it were in the act of putting a handful of earth into his mouth. But Suruchi had little time for him and his antics. So the little one had to make do with a bare sprinkling of sandal-paste on his body, when Suruchi returned to the adult Krishna for an extended dialogue. The complete man, with whom you could talk in intimate terms, and match his wit and wisdom and lovingness with yours.

However Suruchi got scared at times. It seemed to her that Krishna was not merely responding to her in much love and more, but was getting inside her, tearing into the recesses of her mind. And telling her, like as if it was a warning or something, the smile notwithstanding—"I can expose it all! For I am more than a mere man and lover. I am a god. Surely you know that, don't you?"

To which Suruchi would despatch a retort, in apparent jest—"God, indeed! I have created you my dearest, and so I can ask you to get lost, if I so wish. That apart, I am not a fool, I know myself. There is nothing wrong in there. I never mince my words, that's for sure. But I have not misled anybody, my husband, my daughter, or anybody else. So there's nothing you can scare me with..

And therefore you are bound to me, enmeshed in my love and my laws, and the limits I have set for you. Is that clear?"

Even so, she was sometimes troubled by a strange feeling of discomfort. It seemed to her that the P.A. fellow had exceeded his brief, with the result that this one was a little too lively for his own good. Couldn't he be a little more restrained in putting out that smile? Or those naughty sidelong glances?

She felt some such agitation to-day. But she ignored it. And as usual she consummated the *Puja* by lighting two lamps at his feet.

She retired to her balcony and the easy chair. And set out to read the novel she was half-way through, even as she called out to the cook for placing orders for the lunch. Which was her way of telling herself and Krishna that the love-play was over for now.. till the evening.

II

"I am not going to any bloody school!"

"Don't! Go to hell!"

Sukanya shouted at her son—"Bonny! "That's all. Didn't seem like she could complete the sentence. And so Bonny and Rini, brother and sister, went about their wordy warfare.

"You bastard—you -"

"Do you know the meaning of 'bastard'? Shall I tell Mama?"

"Go ahead. As if Mama would bother listening to you!"

But Sukanya heard them. And was overpowered by a sense of impotent rage. These two were really getting impossible, she thought. Foul-mouthed brats, that's what they were! She was torn between the urge to give up and go somewhere else, or to say something good and proper. But eventually she felt that she just couldn't cope with this daily grind that drained the life out of her. And so when Bonny looked to his mother for help, he could not find a trace of anger or some such thing on her face. He could only imagine that she was in pain. Her fleshy rounded face was riven with so many lines - furrows on the brow, crow's feet around the eyes, and those tiny contortions all over.

Bonny averted his eyes. Like as if he had no time to waste his sympathies on her.. Mama was an oddball!

Anyway they were found leaving for school after some time, and Sukanya noticed how keen they were to get going. So much so, she noted, that they even forget to say 'bye' to their Mama. Unless, of course, it was deliberate. And the quarrel was a sham, just an exercise to let everybody know that their mother was an useless nobody!

Sukanya was ashamed to think such vile thoughts about her children. It is a bad case of nerves, for I am tired, sick and tired of life - she went on repeating to herself. Even though I am still young and beautiful too, as many would say, she added.

But how did I lose my zest for life? Didn't they take it away from me?

Hardly had she levelled the charge, that they trooped in, one by one, to plead "not guilty.." Dr. Biswal. Stutters as he pleads his innocence (the poor man stutters when he is earnest about something), and says he is more of a friend and well-wisher than a family physician. Thus he varies his tonics, so she won't get bored. And takes care to suggest ever so gently that she is still a good-looker (Excuse me Mrs. Mohapatra, your face is so much like Hema Malini's, the eyes in particular). Not that he tries to flirt

with me,— he won't dare! .. But my dear husband Mr. Manmohan Mohapatra, metals engineer, does go on about my eyes—doesn't he? Now he must say his piece too! And he pours if out, breathlessly, like as if it was a rare opportunity given to him. It's only my eyes which are soft, he says, and not my bosom which is firm as firm can be (naughty!), while the worst offender is my ultra-feminine soul which is a little too delicate for this world (I am sorry I got so upset to-day for no reason when he was searching for some of his papers in my drawer). But never mind, he assures me, he will always take care of my sensitivities,—not as mere husband, but as an elder brother, or may be as a father.. No Sir! no one can be a substitute for my Papa! He would indeed have felt sorry for me, had he been alive, that I am burdened with all these domestic chores. Used to say that all the goodnesses had got together in my person, and so beautifully, and that's why he had named me Sukanya. It was so hard to decide, he said, whether his daughter should be made to excel in painting, or in dance, or in music, for that matter. I would never have wasted my time over history and all, to fetch a stupid degree, but for his prolonged illness. And got married too, before I was twenty. No, my dear, you may love me like nothing on earth, but you can never be like my Papa. Sorry!..

Only he could understand me. For he knew how simple and sensitive, and unearthly I really am, have always been..

Sukanya resumed, as it were, the sympathies that the men of this world had meant to bestow on her, and placed it all in the hands of her Papa, who was no more. And pleaded with him, - Please have it back Papa, the whole of it; the others were interlopers. And make me your little *Konu* again, the child who would lie on your lap for hours together on a lazy winter's day.. and play with your bushy moustaches, and feed you with make-believe *Sandesh, rosogallahs* etc., while you regaled her with nonsense stories.. and time flowed on silently, like it had ceased to flow..

Her thoughts suddenly ceased. As if she heard some approaching footsteps, heavy and menacing. But they soon bounced back in a passionate outburst of anger and more.

..Come ! I knew it! That you would come and stand between us, like Time's own trusted watchdog, and pull me out from Papa's lap. Without uttering a single word. Implying that I was old enough to realise my duties and responsibilities. That I had home-work to do or some such useful work, like a sensible girl, instead of imposing myself on a doting father. But didn't I know the truth? You were jealous of me, that's why.

Yes, I will say that! A thousand times. You may be my mother, but you were jealous of me. It's you who have brought me to this pass. For you have killed my faith in myself. You have impaled me with those large eyes

of yours, and made me feel small. As if my goodness was but a sham, I was not really that delicate and sensitive, and that it was little more than a pretense, a time-worn ruse to attract the men!

Sukanya looked at the accused at the bar, the real one this time, with steady unblinking eyes. So much so that she did not notice the home-coming smile of her husband who had just returned from his jogging session. Nor did she have ears for the servant Dharmu who was asking for some instructions. Looked as if she was holding fast to her defences, for once.

But as usual she could not hold on to it for long. She broke down and let her tears flow, like nobody's business. To the tune of thoughts such as these—

She won't come to me though. She would prefer to stay on in that empty river-side house in a far-off-town. In the company of her Krishna. Even my tears won't make the slightest differences. I can see her jeering at me with that oddly beautiful smile (odd for an old woman, I must say!)- "You silly girl! Won't you grow up ever? Who do you think will be impressed by those tears? Your Papa is not there any more, and your mama is nobody's fool, as you must know very well.."

However, in the silent hours of another forenoon, Sukanya was trying to clutch at a certain decision before it lost its shape, merged with another, or went haywire, like one of those clouds she was looking at.

I won't implore her to come, she said. I won't shed my tears into the letter. No anger, no nothing. It would be just an invitation to come and stay with me for a couple of months. A plain proposition made by one adult individual to another for the sake of.. old times.. may be company..

Damn it! She is my mother, after all, and she owes it to me - doesn't she?

(A rather indecent image came to her mind, which she managed to banish instantly. Mama was lying flat on the bed, and her only child was holding fast to the two breasts brimming with milk, not knowing which one to suck, to start with).

You married me off. Papa passed away. And so you thought you could be one of those grand and lonely ladies in a historic castle, happy in the company of a dozen cats, and your Krishna above all, whispering love to him every morning and evening. But that's being selfish - didn't you know that, with all your glib talk of right and wrong? You may not love me, I couldn't care less, but don't you have a duty towards your daughter? Shouldn't you be concerned over her distress, and do something about it?

Thus she did finally decide to write to her mother, inviting her to spend a month or two at her place. She acted on it immediately, lest she might

weaken in her resolve as the moment passed. And in her new-found courage she added an unwritten postscript for good measure - There'll be a showdown this time, may be an explosion, you take it from me. And it's better that way!

Meanwhile the clouds were thickening in the sky, getting darker and darker. A developing phenomenon that she had unfortunately failed to notice, occupied as she was with her thoughts.

She shrieked as there was a brilliant flash followed by peals of thunder, and ran inside.

..Everyone knows that I am scared of this wretched thing. So couldn't somebody be here with me, at this moment?

Sukanya threw herself on the bed to compose herself. But when she looked up to see her image in the mirror of the dressing table, she was not too pleased at the sight that greeted her—a face drained of colour, and the loose drooping mouth, among other things. "That is no beauty!", she swore under her breath.

III

About a month had passed since Suruchi had come to stay with her daughter. But there was not a word from her yet, about going back to her riverside home. May be she had made a casual query sometime back, half in jest,—"Pray tell me, when do I leave?" To which the daughter had replied smilingly, "You shall not!". Then the mother had given her a look of mock-surprise, and there followed an exchange of smiles, a little too broad to be called pretty. It seemed as if the mutual lovingness, genuine as it might be, was being played up as a game.

For Sukanya was uncomfortably conscious of the written words of invitation she had posted to her mother, which had brought her here. How come she was so prompt in responding to it, like as if it was a SOS? Could she really read into them all that lay in the background - the righteous indignation of a daughter standing up for her rights? Or did it sound like she was crying out in pain or anguish or something? And she hoped the wrong words stood deleted, true and proper.

Whereas Suruchi thought she had got the message alright. That this daughter of hers had not really changed. Apparently she was still nursing a childish grievance against her mother. Moreover she had made a valiant effort to read through the deleted lines, and she thought she had spotted the all-important word.. It's "love", I am sure! Konu is laying claim to my love, as if she had lost it somehow somewhere. Foolish girl!

Suruchi was not overpowered by any surge of sentiment by getting at the meaning of those words, - written, unwritten, or deleted. She hated to be sentimental. Wasn't it rather amusing, she thought, that Konu, now a middleaged woman, should plead for her Mama's love?.. Like as if it was a piece of *rosogallah* I had denied her, and have kept it tucked away all these days, inside of me!

Her amusement was however properly seasoned with compassion. Which made her feel, as she always did at such moments, like a tall and austere tree, shorn of leaves and all, that must necessarily be generous towards the weak and deluded ones, burdened with their bounties, so-called.

The imagery held a special significance for her, derived as it was from a visual fact which had lent itself to her understanding. And to her understanding alone, as she thought. There was that bare white-skinned tree on the river-bank. In the company of those many ordinary ones, sporting the tropical fare, profuse and profligate, of leaves and flowers and fruits. She conceded that the latter would have moved writers to weave some sweet and beautiful lines around them, and prevailed on painters to place them neatly in their canvases of the "sunset on the river". But the one that stood out, proud and unyielding, was that loner. For deprived as it might be, it didn't have to suffer any empty chatter, vague murmurings, clinging and cloying dewdrops, and all the rest. Like Suruchi Mohanty! Straight and true and distinctive in her own stature of sorrow! 'Yes indeed, that is me!', she was fond of reminding herself when she passed by it, or recalled it sometime in her silent hours.

In fact she had been assailed by a bout of compassion right after she had read through the letter for the first time. So much so, that she had asked her Krishna that evening,—"Could you kindly tell me why my daughter is such a weakling? Couldn't the poor dear take a leaf out of the book of her mother, and learn to stand on her own legs? Learn to make the most of her own life?" To which Krishna gave a quizzical smile which she did not like.

Besides, she had sensed a peculiar glitter in his eyes. "Well, what's the matter?" —she queried him—"Are you also itching to go on a pleasure-trip? Or you think you have some business to do with my daughter, do you?"

Anyway it did appear that she was happy in her daughter's home, if you considered the extra dimension of a certain sweetness in her voice, a studied softness in her gestures, and her readiness to come out with jokes and witticisms on the slightest pretext. But perhaps the source of such conduct lay beyond the daughter's domain, in the play-house of Bonny and Rini, her two grand-children. They were almost always asking her,

when they were at home, to join them in admiring the miracle of their never-ending artifacts - from the plasticine monsters to the paper-rose that looked like Mama's powder puff. And to listen to their legends and mysteries. And even to mediate in their quarrels, which were of course, far less than before. Notwithstanding the warning she had administered, in the very beginning of her stay, that she was no traditional grandma, and they should not expect any nonsense rhymes or stories from her.

Thus the days passed in a sweet and smooth togetherness. Perhaps more than the mother and daughter could have bargained for. But that is what troubled them both. Sukanya felt that a showdown was surely in the cards, though she did not know how to go about it. The best she could do sometimes was to rest her eyes on her mother in a slow deliberate pause, so she would know that there was something her daughter wanted to say. Which she should be able to guess, clever as she was by common consent.

Pity, Suruchi could not summarily dismiss that look as an oddity that went with the disposition of a foolish daughter, whom she loved anyway. She sensed that her daughter was seeking an explanation, a proper woman-to-woman explanation, for all that had happened in the past. Now that she was an adult, a wife and mother too. So a certain tension was building up inside her, as if she was being asked to respond to a challenge that she could not ignore.

Therefore she was trying to recall the hurts, that is, some of those little things that could have hurt this overly sensitive child, and to frame the answers.

..Be sensible my dear. I have been hard on you, I confess, but only for your own good. I didn't want to spoil you, more so when your Papa was such an incorrigible softie.. Yes, when he returned sometimes from his long tours you used to pester him so with your lovey-dovey chatter that he got lost in you. And I would say 'Stop it, you are no baby, my dear!' So what? Was it nice of you to behave that way? Moreover as a wife didn't I also have a role to play in the homecoming scene? Or was it meant to be played only in the conjugal bed?.. Once in a family picnic you offered a big chunk of chocolate-cake to a beggar boy, and I told you not to be a show-off. Yes, I did. For it was indeed so. You had been taken in, a few days earlier, by the remarks of a so-called auntie of yours. That you were a spitting image of your father, a veritable Vishnu, kindness incarnate, etc. Rubbish! As if they were childhood mates, that bitch and your Papa, and she knew him better than anyone else!.. And yes, I killed your calf-love. I tore up your love-letter when I discovered it, and taunted you openly. That's because I knew what a weakling you were. You couldn't have got through the rough-and-tumble of life with that romantic third-rater. And

see what a solid fellow I paired you with, a real man who can support you at all times, and in every way. Don't you agree?

..Anyway, forget it all, the dead past! Now, if it suits you, I can make an open and loud declaration that I love you. I love you so very much! OK?

That is how she began to organize the defence in her mind, moving on to a magnanimous and good-humoured finalé. Yet she could not shake off the fear that the storm might break anytime, though she felt sure that she could ride it.

Her fears could well have been liars. But it so happened that storm or no storm, the sky had indeed clouded over on a certain afternoon. Which prompted the irrepressible Rini to play naughty for the benefit of a distinguished audience—the grandma.

It started with an innocuous statement of fact. Mother and daughter, and the two grand children had got together in a cosy corner for a pro-enjoyment session, laughing over the supposedly funny goings-on in the neighbourhood, and munching buttered *murhi* (rice-crispies) from a common bowl. When Rini made the bald statement—

"It's going to rain to-day"

Nobody paid any attention to her. So she let them have it straightaway.

"Then there will be lightning and thunder. And then Mama will howl and get under the bed (hi - hi)."

Bonny also joined in the mirth.

They are really going too far, Suruchi thought, and silenced them immediately. But she noticed how Sukanya had suddenly been transformed, as it were, into a stone-image of silence. An image, that was getting dark and darker in an accusing stance, - 'It's no use asking them to shut up. The wound remains; has always remained. You should know that Mama!'

No! There is nothing really I ought to know or remember. It's all your foolish imagination. And as if you would remember, a little girl of three! - Suruchi started thus to remonstrate her daughter, inwardly.

..You don't remember a thing. And don't tell me it has crept into your subconscious. Don't feed me with all that Freudian jazz!

..Anyway how could you ever imagine that I had left you to fend for yourself, when that blighted fire broke out in the living room, and was threatening to spread? How could any mother be that stupid? You must know that your Papa was around in the adjacent room, and he would surely have carried you off to the open courtyard as he eventually did (may be there was a little delay, which made you cry, cry your heart out), and said some unkind things to me.

..But none would have bothered to save my Krishna, - don't you see that? And so I had to leave you, just for a trifle second, and rush inside to rescue him.. Look, why can't you or anybody else, for that matter, see the simple logic of my action?

Suruchi could not find any gleam of understanding in the dark visage of her daughter. And thus she felt, perhaps for the first time in her life, that she may well have been guilty. At least that's how the jury would be inclined to pronounce on the basis of the given facts.

It's a shame, she thought, that no daughter or jury would be able to appreciate the truth of her Krishna. That he was no doll nor a lifeless piece of bronze. No mere god either.. An outburst, inarticulate as it was, pierced her heart—

Very well, my dear, you may punish me if you like!

Could Sukanya really hear her anguished cry, and that's what prompted her to do what she did, in an apparent bid to relieve the distress of her mother?

* *

Suruchi had not noticed that her daughter had been watching her for quite sometime when she was having her evening dialogue with Krishna on that day. So she was taken by surprise when Sukanya asked her endearingly, when she was lighting the second lamp, at the end of the session—

"Why do you light the second lamp, Mama? Isn't one enough?"

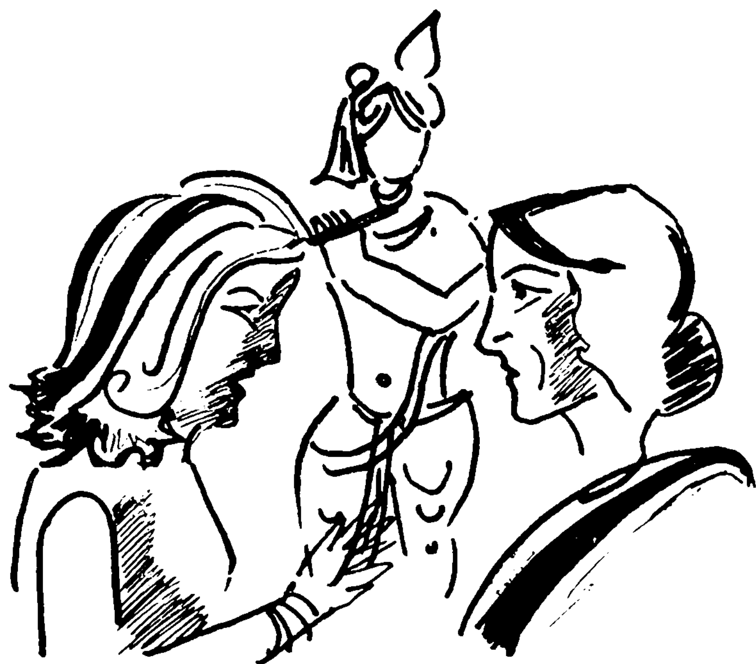
Suruchi could have answered here truthfully that one was for Krishna, and the other for herself, for it was a relationship. And strictly between the two of them, in the intimacy of love or whatever. But she was impelled to tell a lie, because she could assure herself that it was indeed no such thing. Could the love of a mother ever commit a lie that was wrong? So she answered,

"Can't you understand it, silly? There is only one other person now in this world, whom I can call my own.."

She did not continue. Perhaps she couldn't. But she was overwhelmed by a surge of happiness when she saw the glow in her daughter's face. It seemed as though she had had never any sorrow in her life, no craving nor desire left to be fulfilled. My daughter is indeed beautiful, much more than her mother!—She decided.

But Sukanya had something left to say. And it came a few days later, from out of the blue. She said it haltingly in a pleading, and almost apologetic tone, like as if she was compelled to voice the sentiment.

"You know what, I feel like worshipping Krishna—But only your Krishna, and no other. Couldn't you leave him for me, Mama?"



Suruchi was stunned. But she tried her utmost to absorb the shock. It had to be so, yes, it had to be so—she repeated to herself. "Very well", she said after a few moments' pause, and did not allow the teardrops glistening in her eyes, to find their way.

However she consoled herself by saying, in the manner of adducing a proof, that after all this Krishna did not belong to her. He had been brought to her by that P.A. fellow, a funny name he had - she remembered it now - Thakkadi, or something like that. I shall get hold of another, and by myself, she said, choosing him with meticulous care. So I can possess him fully, and entirely!

Yet it was possible that on her return home, she would find that the bare tree was missing, with but a stump rooted in the earth to tell her the story. And then she would perhaps say, truly enough, that the tree was not owned by her. It belonged to the wood-cutter.

11 DISPOSSESSED

The Oriya original "Manihara" is the title-story of the author's 4th collection "Manihara", published in 1970, which received the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976.

The English version is a translation made by Sri K.K. Mohapatra and Sri Leelawati Mohapatra, and stands included in the English collection "Wild Peacock and other stories".

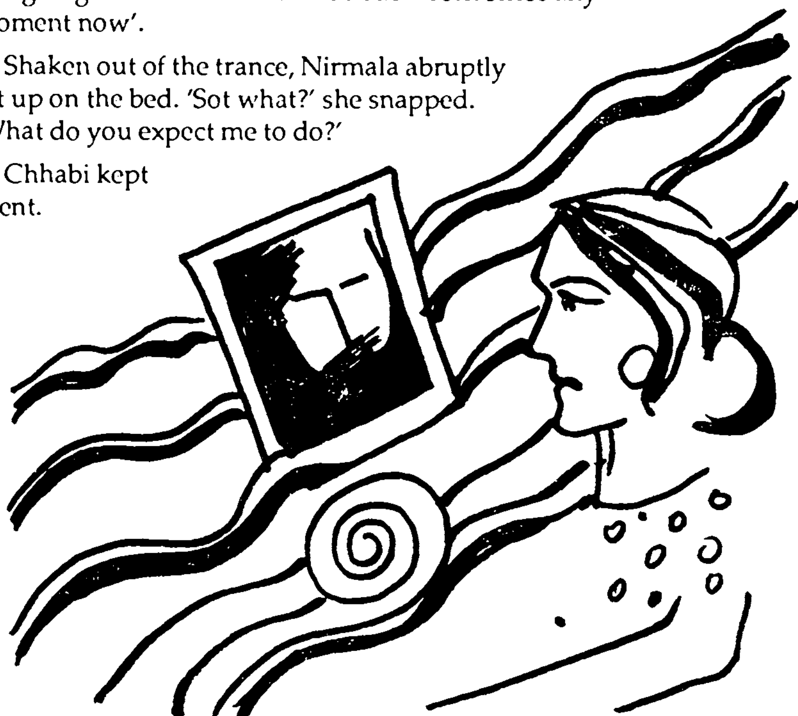
I

He is not here, he's gone, But he was here a moment ago, wasn't he? He pressed his face against mine and I caressed his neck, nipping the prickly heat on his body. His damp hair exuded a mildly pungent odour of perspiration. How he stared at me with his sleepy eyes! These people wouldn't believe it all. And how could they? After all, they hadn't given birth to him!

'Come on, Bhauja,' said Chhabi, the youngest sister-in- law. 'It's going to be five. Bhai will be back from office any moment now'.

Shaken out of the trance, Nirmala abruptly sat up on the bed. 'Sot what?' she snapped. 'What do you expect me to do?'

Chhabi kept silent.



It's perhaps Chhabi's turn this afternoon, Nirmala thought, to see that I had my tea. Oh, these people They are such a silly lot. Or are they too damn shrewd for me? Imagine, even this chit of a girl could be one of them. I can feel her prying gaze shooting its probing needles into my skin. Now she would go and regale them with her tattle: *you know what, Bhauja slept like this, she looked at me like that, she said this, she said that, she's growing a horn on her head, yes, I saw it with my own eye, and she didn't touch the tea till I begged and begged her on my knees.* Oh, my God, how she would gloat! Then they will descend on me, one by one, the whole pack, the oldest to the youngest, all of them. They will paw and pat me, sniffle and vie with each other to parade their sympathy. Their sympathy, ha! My son is gone. And what a show I am putting on?

She smiled bitterly and burst into a flood of tears. Resting her face between her upraised knees, she tried to stifle her sobs. No, she decided, I will stop making a spectacle of myself. In fact, I should join *them* — giggle and gossip, bake cakes and peel vegetables, and . . . Listen, can't you bring him back once, my son? Just once, Just for two minutes. I tell you what I will do. I'll take a long look at him and maybe talk to him a little. Then I'll wipe the sweat off his forehead. Is this asking for too much? I am not asking for the moon, am I? Won't he come even once? Why not? What sin have I committed?

A defeated Nirmala raised her head and found Chhabi waiting. 'You're still here?' she asked weakly. 'Why?'

Chhabi quietly left the room. The tea had turned cold.

Next whose turn would it be to pester the life out of me? Nirmala wondered. Would it be the old servant Banchha, or the brother-in-law Ramu? Or would it be the mother-in-law herself?

But Umesh beat them all to it. He stole softly in, cast a glance at his wife and hurried away to change his clothes. Seeming to find the heat oppressive, he looked up at the ceiling to see if the fan was moving at full speed. Then he looked desperately around to fasten his attention onto something, no matter how trivial, as though his whole life depended on it. His furrowed brows and sagging cheeks indicated that he had reached the end of his tether. There's limit to what a man can take, he thought. I am just a creature of flesh and blood and not an epitome of endurance.

Nirmala stared vacantly at her husband. She had no urge to respond to him. I know this man, she mused. He is my husband. I needn't bother to arrange my dishevelled sari and look dainty. His presence makes no difference to me, it can't . It brings no solace, no relief to my aching heart. Look how he's peeling off his clothes and sighing! Oh, the poor husbands — well, what else could they do?

Umesh stood under the fan to dry the sweat. 'Has the tea gone cold?' he asked.

She made no reply.

He sat down beside her. 'Shall I ask for some more?' he enquired timidly.

She shot him a scorching glance. Her moist eyes sparked fire. 'Tea! Tea! Tea!' she explored. 'No one in this house seems to bother about anything else' For heaven's sake, why can't you leave a person alone?'

For a fraction of a moment it seemed he would throw his patience to the wind and take her on. But he knitted his brows and clamped his mouth shut. We are passengers in the same boat of grief, he mused. Both of us are the victims of a common tragedy. Why doesn't Nimu realise she is not alone? How long will she go on like this? Hell, Biju was my son as well. Everyone said he had the same complexion, nose and deep brown hair as mine. Had he lived long enough, we would have gone out on walks, played football and chatted about a world of things. Maybe one day he would have hurt himself while playing. Then I could have sat with him, cheering him up with stories. Another day he would do something naughty, and I would give him a box on the ear. The little scamp would go running to his mother, seeking consolation. Oh, my son! Why did you have to die, son?

Billowing in the breeze, the ends of Nirmala's sari brushed against Umesh gently.

The proximity, the presence. Nirmala sensed that even their sighs were keeping pace with each other. It irritated her—this petty, nominal harmony.

'Aren't we supposed to go shopping this evening?' she said, springing up from the bed. 'Come, let's go.'

Umesh winced.

They dressed and went down the stairs. The hushed family members watched on silently. It was the first time the couple were going out together after the tragedy. Umesh's father had an urge to advise them to take the car, but he kept it to himself.

Umesh tried to keep up a chatter of small talk: The weather is nice, isn't it?.... Where shall we buy Nani's sari — Kishanlal, or Ladies Emporium?...I was to go out on a tour next week, but the boss cancelled it, you know...

They strode side by side, as if in a ceremonial march. Even while weaving through the knot of people at the Clock Tower, Umesh clung to his wife's side. He didn't realise how unusual it was of him.

The market. The hurrying throng. The cacophony of buying and selling, the brisk air of commercial enterprise. A hawker howled beside a pile of cheap red and blue handkerchiefs. A rustic girl had picked up one and was admiring it, while her harried mother was trying to drag her away. A bird seller dangled an aviary of irate, screeching mynahs. A Sikh kid, his hair tied up in a bun was bawling. The nylon-clad, hugely lipsticked mamma, who had vanished into some shop, waddled out. In a small, cramped shop two young workers were rolling bidis, seemingly wrapped up in their work. An old man, at the fruit sellers', examined each mango elaborately to ensure their ripeness.

A peddler advertising a wonder ointment for scabies shoved a leaflet into Nirmala's hand.

They do not know, Nirmala sighed, this multitude. They do not know a thing about me. They do not know my child left me only a fortnight ago.

She gloated in the secret pride of her private grief. I know what these people do not yet know, steeped as they are in ignorance and indifference. Am I not like a God incognito in this crowd? Or maybe I am just an unredeemed sinner, still at large and loose, sullied by the putrid blood of death, who could pollute humanity with her faintest touch. My, why is that little brat staring at me? Could he have found me out?

'Not that way, Nimu,' Umesh kept up, not daring to relapse into silence. 'Why're you heading towards the vegetable market? We've yet to go to the cloth shop, don't you remember?. . . Look out, there's a garbage heap ahead. . . You must be dog-tired by now. Come, let's have a cold drink. . .'

As she waited for the drink to be served, Nirmala contemplated her husband's hairy hands and heavy face, and suddenly felt very tired. This fellow's not just a husband, she thought, but a man, a male. His gross, unperceiving maleness, his remorseless male body. God, how large he looms! And what is it he is so much at pains to convey? — that he understands? Does he, huh? How dare he imagine he has plumbed the mysterious depth of my grief? Is it because he had laid his body over mine and fathered my child? Oh God, even this marketplace is no different from the bedroom. Can I never get rid of this man? Will he always hover over me? Oh, how I would love to throw the drink on his face and run off — run off and get lost in the crowd. At least, I can be alone then, I can laugh, cry, dance, or do anything. Even strip — strip myself of the exteriors and whirl within the recesses of my suffering. With nobody to watch me. Least of all this man here. There will be no one but me. Only me. Me, my sorrow, my son. He will steal softly in, my son, and like an eager little calf press his face against my breasts heavy with milk. That three year old hulk! Yes, I used to suckle him still. How does that concern you? Who're you to presume everything for me?



Nirmala stiffened.

It did not escape Umesh. He felt a stab of panic. One never knows, he thought. She might suddenly dissolve into tears, or flare up most inexplicably.

Old doctor Gobardhan's words came to his mind: Listen, young man. Pull yourself together. You can't afford to give in. You must give Nimu strength. In times like this women need careful handling.' But why? he demanded. Am I not suffering? Am I supposed not to because I'm a man, a male? Am I not the father of the child that is dead? Ah, it's easy to preach, damn it.

He felt anger rising in him, but he collected himself quickly. He looked at Nirmala dolefully and hoped her black mood will pass.

The drink over, they bought the sari and returned home. The walk back home was deathly silent. Nirmala made up her mind to sleep henceforth alone on a bare mattress in the veranda.

That night Umesh tossed and turned on the bed. Why is it dark outside? he wondered. Where has the moon hidden itself — in which corner of the sky? Why is the night so quiet and still, devoid of its healing touch? Oh, does the night ever assuage? What then comforts the soul? Hell, nothing. The poor damned males are condemned to fend for themselves!

His burning eyes swam over the cold lonely flowers sprouting in the flower vase. They had not wilted yet. One must either face up to one's grief manfully or succumb to it, he sighed. There's no other way.

He had a sudden urge to hug somebody tightly, breathlessly. Oh God, my son is dead, he groaned. My wife has forsaken me. She wouldn't even deign to sleep with me. Isn't she mine any longer? Oh, this ghastly, this crippled, fetid old night! My wife sleeps there on the veranda. Oh, let her. I will not go to her. Damn it, I can't stoop so low. Man, I can't grovel, I can't cry out for help!

Yet, after a few seconds, he crossed over to the veranda and lay down by her side. He unbuttoned her blouse and buried his face between her breasts.

Half in sleep, Nirmala blinked and pulled him closer, pressing his eager mouth to her breast. A sharp thrill ran down her spine. My little Biju's come back, she fancied. Oh, what a state he had reduced me to, the naughty thing!

She fondled his face. Waves of warmth and dizziness swept over her. My Biju has grown so much, she smiled. So what? He's still a little child to me — the same face, the same nose, the same greedy moist lips.

Then she felt the unmistakable stirring of the male body, the slow surging of its desire. Oh God, this is not my child, she woke up. Why, what have I been dreaming?

'Aren't you ashamed of yourself?' she hissed, recoiling from him in disgust. 'Who asked you to come here?'

II

Nirmala looked down from the balcony. The cobbled courtyard was still damp from an early morning shower. Everything is so real, so solid, she smiled bitterly. The house with its high ceiling, the cracks on the boundary wall, the iron vaults, the tall almirahs, the bathtubs, the chipped flowerpots, the pigeon cotes, the new garáge, the fresh coat of varnish on the wall, the brand new radiogram. . . Everything so solid, so permanent— the strength and pride of an unchanging frieze. But not me. Not my son. We fade, we pale, we die, eventually.

How long has he been dead, my son? Ten or fifteen days — how long? A year? But I no longer fly into tempers nor cry as bitterly as before. Maybe soon I will begin to giggle again, play cards, strut about in new saris, guzzle like a sow and chatter nineteen to the dozen. Sometimes I will remember my child. Of course, I will. But then I will not be so heartbroken.

Maybe only a lustrous drop of tear—my poignant homage to his memory— will glisten in my eyes: *Oh, once I had a little child!*

Oh no! It's not going to be like that, she shuddered. I am not going to sit and embroider covers for the radiogram, or cook mutton curry. I am supposed to stitch and cook well — ha! Damn it, I couldn't care less about their appreciation. Just give me a little more time, I beg of you. Don't rush me, Have pity on me. Please. I know I am beginning to forget him — there's a current carrying me down, a breeze blowing me away. Soon I will be forgetting him completely, oh God!

'Nimu,' her mother-in-law called. 'Nimu!'

There, Nirmala sighed, how her voice drips tenderness. Perhaps the spices have been ground and she is waiting for me to cook the mutton. Or maybe it's time for the father-in-law's sherbet. I don't mind slogging, but what I can't stand is her stuffing me with rasogollas. Why does she do that? But then the fault is not hers alone, is it? Don't I love sweets? Don't I love being fussed over?

'Coming,' Nirmala responded reluctantly. She went down the stairs, almost brushing against the wall.

Down from the landing, she could see several pairs of shoes in the veranda. A particularly battered brown pair stood out from the rest. A chill ran down her spine. So the wise old heads have dropped in for a morning session, she groaned. I know who must be stealing the show — the owner of the battered pair of shoes, the family physician and the father-in-law's closest friend to boot — that old fogey Gobardhan.

'Roll up some *paans* for them, will you?' bade her mother-in-law. 'Two for Batadada. you know what he takes, don't you? Without lime. Why didn't you have the *payas* last night? I reminded you so many times!'

Nirmala did not answer. She began to roll up the betel leaves. As fragments of the conversation floated out of the drawing room, she craned her neck and caught a glimpse of the gaunt white-haired profile of the doctor.

'You know, Dasarathi,' the old doctor was saying, with the finality of clinching the issue, 'your doctor, father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, and the likes are of little avail when you're up against fate. What are we all worth to it? A mere straw in the wind.' In a gesture of reverence, he raised his hands heavenwards. 'Say, what all we didn't do to save that child! Till there was the minutest chance, I gave you hope. But he was beyond cure, beyond all our efforts. We couldn't have held him back. Do you remember what I told you that evening a week before his death?. . .'

Which evening? Nirmala tensed. Why, nobody ever told me anything about it! Till the last minute all of you led me to hope that my little Biju will pull through. Even on the last day, you, doctor, patted his head and said, God's there, everything'll be all right. Why couldn't you come out with the truth? Why couldn't you say, God is in His heaven all right, but your child won't survive.

She glared at the doctor's sturdy, aboriginal head. Biju had never taken to the old goat, she recalled.

'You know what happened to my sister-in-law's daughter?' Batadada began. 'You people ought to have seen that plump little angel. An absolutely healthy child, nothing was ever wrong with her. Then, one fine morning, she complained of a stomach ache and the same evening she popped off. . .'

Oh, my God, what's all this! Nirmala felt giddy. Has my son been dead so long that these people talk so unfeelingly? Don't they have any compassion?

More instances and illustrations of untimely deaths followed. They vied with each other to recall as many incidents as they could.

Nirmala cocked her ears when she heard the deep bass voice of her father-in-law.

'My father had an elder brother', Dasarathi began. 'He died before he was three months old. When my grandma was around, she used to talk about him. You wouldn't believe how her eyes would instantly well up with tears, as if the boy had died only the night before. . . A mother is a unique creature. She never forgets the child she bears for ten months inside her'.

'True,' chimed in the rest. 'True!'

Dasarathi fell silent. Nirmala was relieved. She could imagine his broad face twitching in deep recognition of a mother's grief.

'Whatever the Lord does is for the best,' the old doctor droned. 'Who are we to question His intentions? More often than not what He snatches away with one hand He gives back with the other. If He plucks a fruit before it is ripe, He bestows another in no time. It's the underlying principle of the creation. A purely biological necessity. I tell you Nimu will have another child within a year. Dasarathi, old boy, cheer up, I say. You will surely see the face of another grandson. You will live another decade.'

Nirmala froze. She was gripped by a sudden fear. Why did he speak like that? Wasn't it downright cruel and mean? Did even my father-in-law get sold out on all that rubbish?

It was now Batadada's turn. Munching *paan* vigorously, he reeled off yet another story.

They must be enjoying the whole thing, she sighed, these august, venerable judges. They must be smacking their lips while pronouncing their precious, irrefutable verdicts. Creation and biology, my foot!

As she walked into the room with the *paan-tray*, she cast at them a sidelong glance. She knew she was right. Behold, she thought to herself, the mighty Lords sitting atop the celestial Kailash. What am I but a mere dancing girl to them! A nimble dancing girl to provide them with a little distraction!

She was not angry; on the contrary, she felt very small and insignificant. She could sense the mute blessings of the Lords snowing on her. She suddenly felt heavily impregnated. Their divine eyes remained rivetted on her and they smiled benignly at her rapidly swelling belly. She flushed. So it's just a matter of one child following another, huh? One fruit after another? Damn you Lords. Am I a cow and a tree or what?

Nirmala did not feel like going back to the kitchen. Excusing herself from her mother-in-law, she walked off. She could feel her fond gaze resting on her. Is she, too, dreaming of the next fruit? she wondered.

To catch her breath, she stopped on the stairs. Who can I speak to? Who will understand?

Dressed for office, Umesh came down for lunch. Nirmala paused in her tracks. Have I been looking for this man? she wondered. Of course, who else? Who else will understand? Ah, the poor dear looks so pale and haggard. No, I must restore him to strength, and together we will put up a front against the rest. They do not know us yet.

Overwhelmed with love, she took another step towards him.

Umesh looked away.

Nirmala knew he was sulking. It's my fault, she cursed herself. I've spurned him, I've pushed him away. All this while I hadn't even bothered to see if he existed. Maybe he wanted to say something last night. Oh, why did I push him away? But why is he so angry? Aren't we in the same boat? We are so helpless, both of us. Why should we resent each other?

She looked up at him expectantly.

It was not that her unarticulated feelings failed to reach him; they did. But he thought he would rather wait till she was her usual self. She's unhinged, he reminded himself as he shuffled nervously towards her.

They came face to face near the staircase window overlooking the lawn. Then, suddenly, oblivious of the world around—the sand heap, the

chained dog, the brisk labourers—with her arms outflung, she made a dash towards him. 'I can't stand this place any longer,' she burst out, holding him in a clinch. 'Take me away elsewhere. Please!'

Umesh was taken aback. Raising her chin, he looked into her eyes. 'What's the matter?' he asked. 'What's wrong?'

'Promise me,' she stammered. 'Promise me you will not want a child again. Give your word.'

He did not know what to make of this sudden, garbled entreaty. 'But who says I want a child?' he comforted her, resting his head on her shoulder. 'I don't want anyone but you.'

When she opened her eyes, Nirmala found the congregation dispersing. The old doctor was struggling to open his hole-ridden umbrella.

Watching them, she felt very small again. But now it did not hurt her, this feeling of smallness; on the contrary, there was something cute about it—the cuteness of a bee or a butterfly, or of a little red fish, maybe.

III

Early that night they lay in their spacious comfortable bed and made love with abandon, their body and mind achieving a rare fusion.

But shortly afterwards she began to feel restless. Did they bury or burn my child? she wondered.

A long unresolved question gnawed at her. What happened to the half-eaten lozenge he had stashed away in his shirt pocket?

She turned to ask her husband, but he was asleep already.

OTHER ASHES

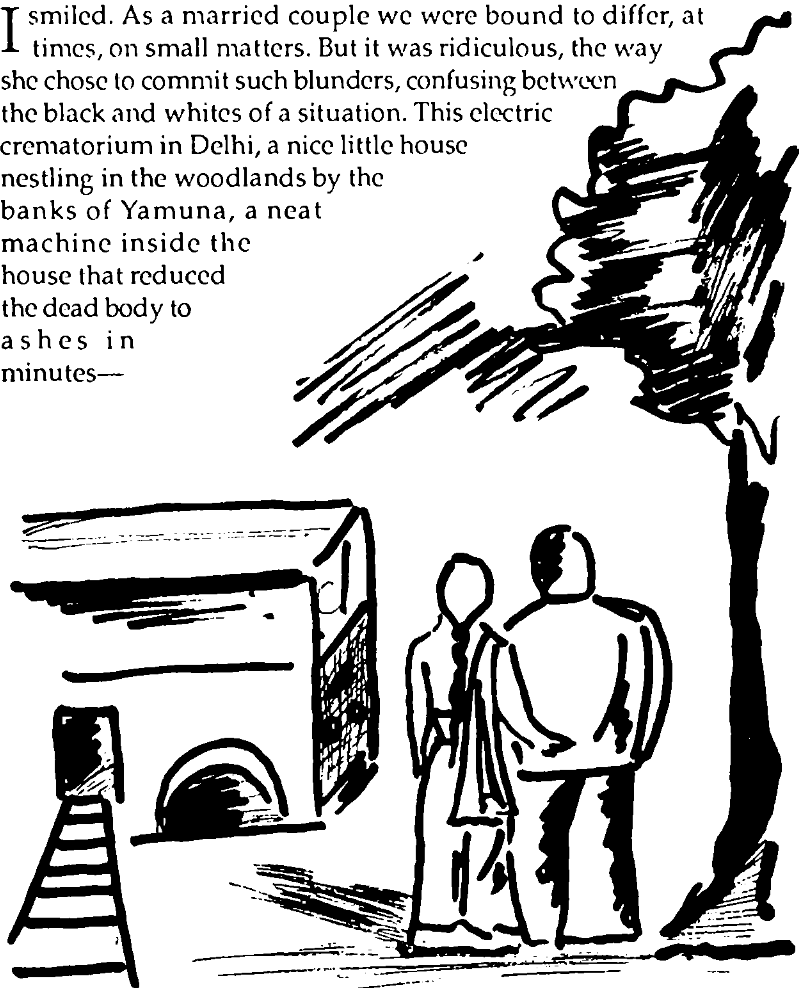
The Oriya Original "Bhinna Paunsha" is the title story of the author's 9th collection "Bhinna Paunsha" which received the Sarala Award for the year 1985.

The English version is a translation made by the author and has not been published so far.

"Let's have a walk", I said.

"Burning ghat for a walk, indeed!", she snubbed me.

I smiled. As a married couple we were bound to differ, at times, on small matters. But it was ridiculous, the way she chose to commit such blunders, confusing between the black and whites of a situation. This electric crematorium in Delhi, a nice little house nestling in the woodlands by the banks of Yamuna, a neat machine inside the house that reduced the dead body to ashes in minutes—



do you call this a burning ghat? Where are the charred logs, broken pots, rags and mats and what have you, the nasty remnants of life burnt away? Or, for that matter, the despicable vultures and jackals? And is there any cause for fear either? On the contrary this is a rare retreat, I would say, for the busy metropolis — acres of sylvan quiet, where the leaves of tall trees flutter beside the sky, and the lone soul of a watchman or a gardener fiddles with the grass, somewhere faraway. Could you find a better place for walks in the city? But my derisive smile was wasted on her, even as she started walking by my side. We walked towards the deeper woods. Slowly though, very slowly, lest the body of Marilyn did not get burnt and lost in our absence. We had to gather a handful of ashes from her body, and then send it to her mother. She would be waiting to receive it.

We were walking in slow strides, and looking back constantly - Has Marilyn come and gone by now?

So, as you can see, we did share the anxiety. Maybe we were irritated over the long wait, but we prayed that we may not be found wanting in the discharge of an obligation, in humanity, towards Marilyn, and that her ashes did not fail to reach her mother in due course. It is another matter that my wife dismissed the crematorium as a burning ghat and was not too keen for a walk. What I am trying to emphasize is that there was no difference whatsoever between us over Marilyn, even though she did not care for aimless walks, as she put it. Fact is, Marilyn was living with us for about a month before she left for Haridwar, and we had developed an affection for her. We were deeply grieved, both of us, when we learnt about her death. And an articulate sigh had escaped our lips, at the same time almost. The main reason being (dear wife will dispute it hotly, I know) that Marilyn was not in our eyes much of a woman, or a man for that matter, but a non-person. And a deluded pitiful being. One of those characters from Gita Mehta's "Karma Cola".

No, I am mistaken, I don't recall any woman in "Karma Cola" who was innocent of the feminine attributes, that is, the vital statistics which would proclaim the difference. My wife would no doubt refer me to her gentle words, and how sweetly she put them together, and to the demure drooping of her eyelids. I might as well add that her smiles were so intriguing that one did not know if the ripples were about to dance or were melting away. Unless, of course, it was all a bundle of nonsense, a certain pose in religiosity that had worn into a habit. That apart, she had the anaemia, added to a fair skin, pale eyes, and non-descript hair. The haemoglobin count, I am sure, would not go beyond eight. So what did it matter if this plain paragon of a woman smiled or wept or did whatever she wished to do?

(She was keeping pace with me. Fine, but why the silence?. . Have you come to like the "burning ghat" after all? Or are you thinking of Marilyn too? Well, you may, for all I care. .)

I have got this bad habit of plucking a flower or a leaf within my reach. And then I tear it to pieces, and do some rubbing and smelling, before I throw it away. My mother says that I used to put it into my mouth too when I was a child, and I got a spanking when the mouth reacted in sores. Never mind. The sensuous mode is not limited to taste-buds. There are other organs too, and I can hardly stop them from fooling around when they are in the mood. Anyway the plants are no human that they would bleed. May be a little stink, or fragrance.. I say, what is this one for a smell? Eucalyptus!

I was pleasantly disturbed in my thoughts. So these rows of tall trees in the funeral place are distinguished indeed, carrying that sharp and pungent smell that shakes you off your sloth and common cold.. tingles you back to life. Fine! I recalled how I once told Marilyn with a certain bravado, when we came to talk about her native country - "Know what? I had been there only for a week, but that was long enough for me to stroke your Kangaroos and tease your Emus. You can't always keep them under cover as your own exclusive specials, can you?" And then she smiled that wan beatific smile of hers, to say, as it were, that she couldn't possibly keep anything for herself, for she had happily offered all her earthly goods, body and soul and everything, to Lord Krishna, and India and the world, in that order. But she added jokingly - "Pity, we couldn't manage to keep only one special breed for ourselves. The eucalyptus. It escaped from our backyard, and spread all over the world, no?" Anyway I was tempted to compliment the estimable eucalyptus for its consideration for this hapless woman from their common motherland. How else would you explain the curious coincidence of her being cremated in the shadows of eucalyptus, of all trees, in distant India? I breathed a deep sigh. And expressed over again my sympathies for this foreigner, I had happened to know.

(Strange! What on earth, has come over you? I take it that your thoughts are also with Marilyn. But are they so much more intimate that you don't even care to look at me? That's absurd, for she was the same for you and me alike. Allow me to repeat that Marilyn was no woman or man either. .)

I have said earlier that her features were innocent of colour and glow and all the rest. Nevertheless I could have seen her differently, and honoured her possibly as a woman, had she treated me to some distinctive gesture, like playing with her eyelashes, twitching her nose, or emitting husky half-notes of pleasure or pain, which would have reminded me of

some woman or other (leave aside my wife) whom I knew well enough, if not intimately. But pity, it was not so.

So I could do no better than regard her as a tall gaunt person of the female species, who belonged to a foreign land and had come to our country in the hope of finding her God, in a certain favourable climate hallowed by Ramakrishna and others. Very well. But you were not the first of those so-called seekers, and surely not the last. And so there was no reason for you to show yourself up as someone special — was there? As someone laden with riches of some other kind, just because you were short of the feminine stuff?

It was all so false, the image of your peace and love, and the gentle virtues. So much so that I had once thought that I could not take it any more, and felt like raping you..

(Now why are you looking at me so? Like as if you are reading through my confession and you have never ever felt urges such as this, dark and secret..)

I did not really care for the odd way she was looking at me, but it seemed my thoughts were transparent, and out of place in that grove of peace. Not because "Shanti Van", the resting place of late Jawaharlal Nehru was fairly close, by the banks of Yamuna. Perhaps we had got a little too far inside the woods, that's why. For the crematorium was not visible from here, and the trees, upstanding as they were like the sentinels of *Yama*, were telling me that they were indeed messengers of peace, that this ends it all, beautifully.. and so thou shall not be obscene.

And then the stench went up.

A stench that pervades the air and spreads over the sky. The eucalyptus could not do a thing. Naturally sensitive as I am, I got a little scared. I felt as if my thoughts were exposed and stank. No! I screamed inside me in defence, and sought to explain this Marilyn situation to my unseen mentor. From beginning to the end. To start with, her bio-data. Her youth was as indeterminate as her sex, but she won't be more than thirtyfive, I suppose. Hailed from Australia. When I had been there I met a lady named Nancy White who claimed to be a friend of India, and took me aside for long spells of chatter. She told me that there was this girl Marilyn, daughter of a dear friend who had gone to India and wanted to be there for all time to come, for she had realised peace and hoped to earn freedom in due course, that she was now in Delhi and would be moving soon to the Himalayas, etc. And she added as a "personal request", that I might look after her, when I went back to Delhi. For the sake, at least, of her poor mother who was crying all the time, telling everybody that she had known

it all along, that this girl would behave thus and leave her home, as she had been seeking God right from the time she was a child. I was irritated. Why didn't she hold her back if she knew that this was going to happen? Or was there no God in your part of the world? Anyway I had merely nodded assent desultorily, and hoped to forget about it when I reached India. But Marilyn appeared in person in Delhi at our place, soon after my return. Said that she had heard about me from Mrs. White, that I was a poet, philosopher and devotee rolled into one, and she wanted to talk to me for a while, if I had no objection. For sure, she troubled me at first sight, and I felt that this strange girl should not be allowed inside my house. I sensed that she was trying to impose a certain serenity on me, telling me that all mornings were sexless, and hence beautiful. They carried no heat, no angst, no nothing, but a promise of light continuous. No thanks. I didn't want to be cooled—So I was not taken in by her and could have bade her goodbye after a cup of tea and a couple of *Shlokas*. But that was not to be, for my wife was overwhelmed by her,—by her words or smiles or whatever. She asked her to stay with us for a few days before leaving for the Himalayas. And she stayed on for over a month.

I could understand on that very first day why her mother had been crying her heart out. She knew that this girl was going to die. Was due to perish in the merciless cold and white of the Himalayas.

So when I got the news of her death from one of her spiritual sisters, so-called, I did not ask the lady about the cause of her death. Did not bother to know the details. In a sense, I felt relieved that the outcome I feared had come to pass, and her failure was proved. And so I did not have to blame myself for anything. When she said that in deference to the wishes of the fraternity the body would be brought down to Delhi for cremation, I volunteered to join the funeral, and noted down the date and time. Later I got a telegram from Mrs. White in Australia requesting me to collect a handful of her ashes, and send it to her. To which I responded immediately and cabled an emphatic yes. That is how I have been waiting here since eleven in the morning, at the cost of some important work, and with my wife in tow, thanks to her insistence. The cremation was due to take place at twelve noon. But it is past one O'clock, and no body is in sight. Well, let us wait for some time more, I decided. Marilyn was a special friend after all..

The stench was acute by now. We looked questioningly at each other. It's the smell of burning flesh. The machine does the burning no doubt, but it can hardly contain the smoke. And it gleefully pollutes the air. So could it be that the body of Marilyn has got burnt by now? No, not likely. You have to have a vehicle carrying the coffin, and a crowd of mourners, and we

couldn't have missed it. That apart — do you think the body of Marilyn, flesh or smoke, would smell that bed?

Anyway now it was quite clear that I was blaming myself and my thoughts for no reason. I was tickled to laughter. Dash it! Would anyone in his senses believe that it was anything more than mischievous (may be in a burst of black humour) to consider raping this Marilyn thing, of whom I have spoken at such great length to explain what she was, body, soul and all? Perhaps it was anger, past mischief. But nobody should think that it was a desperate bid to possess her. That I got mad, having failed to plumb the depths of her peace, like the grazing goat that got nowhere with the vast earth with a mouthful of grass, or the bird that sought to hug the grand spaces in vain, with a wingful of the sky. Forget it. The poor woman was dead. And beaten. But may it please the merciful God to see that her body did not stink!

However, let me dispel my doubts—I said. So I ran towards the building to find out for myself. My wife agreed to stay back.

It was no sweat to cover the small distance from within the grove of peace to the crematorium. But you won't know how I suffered the pains of leaving the gentle murmuring of the leaves and the warm indolent breeze playing through them, to solicit the convenience of a clerk indulging in the big yawn at the reception desk, with a dirty register lying open before him, and wallowing in the unholy vapours emitted by the combination. However this was the least I could do for Marilyn, atleast for her mother. So I asked the clerk straightaway to tell me if the body of a foreign lady due to be cremated to-day had arrived. He took his own time to complete the yawning process, and then licked it clean, as it were, by a vigorous exercise of his tongue over the lips.. and drawled.

"Angrez? Nope."

"Then who was that?"

He mumbled something that sounded like "rubbish". But I pressed him for the proper word, never mind if he blew up. Whereupon he came out with the thunderclap of an answer.

"I told you! *Lawaris.*"

Lawaris. Lawaris. I pronounced the word over and over again. It wasn't the name of somebody, or of some clan, class, and community. Nevertheless the sound carried the strong accents of one who did not belong anywhere. He too had proclaimed his rights. And perhaps that's why you got that putrid smell. But he didn't care. As in life, so in death, the smell that he must offer you—for that was the debt he owed to the world.

No use wondering over how he came, who brought him in and got him burnt away instantly in a huff of smoke. Suffice it to know that he was no Marilyn. No nothing. I hastened to where my wife was waiting for me, and gave her the glad news —

"Lawaris."

"Eh?"

I explained the meaning of the word. Lawaris means somebody who has none to call his own, and when he dies by the roadside or somewhere, there is none to claim the body. So the body is carried away by the municipal squad and left over here. The machine does the rest. But would this explanation ever convey to her the living image? — I thought. For she hasn't seen them as I have. Working in the sludge pit of the metropolis, where the dark slimy staff is processed to form the manure for use in the lawns and gardens of the city. And thus enhance the life beautiful, of flowers and gracious ladies, among other things. Lawaris aged fifteen. Recruited from the Poor House, as none else would like to work in this hell-hole. Even if somebody agreed to come, his rates would be terribly high. So this was the best bargain, never mind if the boy was not equal to the job and couldn't deliver the baskets to the truck waiting to carry the product to the city in good time. That was the economics brought home to me by the concerned official when I had visited the place once in my line of duty. But I could not really see them well enough. For how long could I hold my breath or stifle the smell with a handkerchief? However I remember the smile (or what passes for a smile) settled on his lips. In what way did Marilyn's smile have greater claims to being pale, plain and sad? And hence more peaceful and divine? Maybe one such boy had fallen dead by the road side. But would the foolish smile be still clinging to his lips?, I wondered. I recalled the face of another Lawaris. An old beggar woman with her leprous limbs (could be fake for all I know) wrapped and tied down in dirty linen. I have seen her sleeping at night at the same place where she sat during the day begging for alms. And I have seen the ghastly smile she wore, for greater horror or sympathy, as the case may be, when she hailed the commuters waiting in the bus-stand and advised them on the movement of buses. How could you be sure that her pleasure of living was all sham and madness? How is Marilyn .?

But what has happened to Marilyn? I noticed that my wife was getting more restless than me, looking at her watch ever so often, the frown carved into her face, and not willing to go further inside the woods. As if she was anxious to finish the job, the soonest—damn the eucalyptus, peace grove, et al.

She had enough reasons for impatience. We had thought that with the cremation due at twelve noon, we could take back the ashes about half-an-hour later, whereas now it was half-past two. There is a limit to how long one can wait. Nevertheless I had not imagined that she would be more upset than me. Well, my dear, wasn't she an intimate friend of yours? It was you who begged her to stay on for more than a month—didn't you? Have you forgotten how you were whispering to each other in the prayer-room in the presence of our Krishnas and Vishnus? But tell me, why did you act guilty when I happened once to surprise the two of you in your heart-to-heart talks? As if I was not supposed to share the secret. A mere clumsy male, I could only chant the words of prayer, but couldn't manage to weave the fine silken threads of feeling and thought for the gods, and was most likely to get them torn or get myself entangled..

(It is only a male who would have that urge, in perversion, to rape the promise of peace..)

You and your superior feminine stance! I wished her irritation would grow every passing minute. Thanks to the rising heat. And also when you move inside the shade in the woods, more of those moths hovering around your face, and ants crawling on to your feet, and flies innumerable. Well beyond the point of endurance, when she would say thanks, enough is enough, Marilyn is dead, and let's go home. Surely we can't go back without the ashes, but she would be cured of the Marilyn-love for all time.

God knows what has happened to Marilyn! Perhaps they couldn't arrange for the van, or may be the faithful could not get together.

No use worrying. Let it get late, and more and more late. Meanwhile let's have a couple more of the *Lawaris* bodies, more of the unholy smell, like when you roast dried fish, — so my wife would get real mad. The ghost of Marilyn would be exorcised for good.

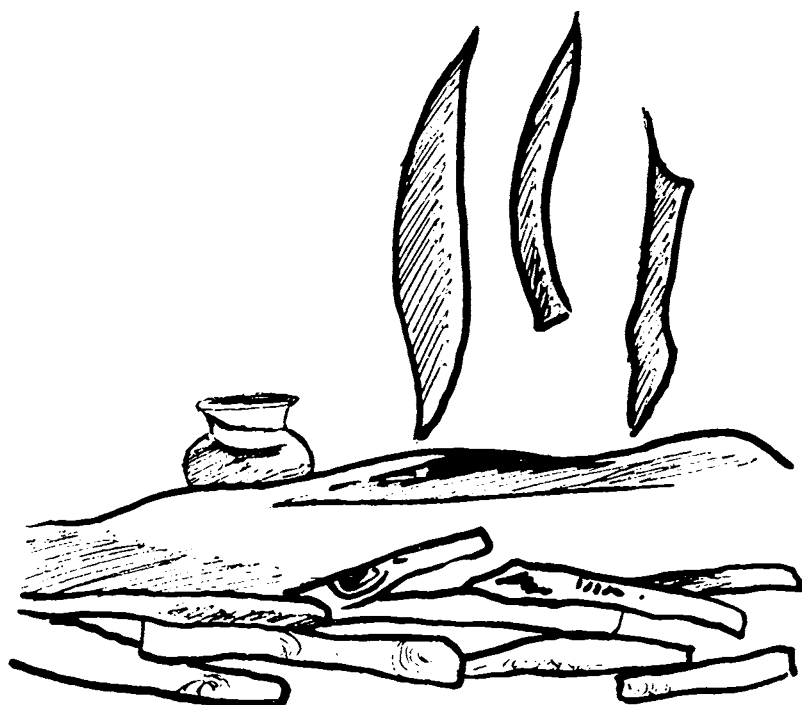
No, you can't blame me. You cling to your Vishnu, and let me speak for the poor, you have your Marilyn and I have.. or do you think I am not fit for either? Outcaste for one, and incapable for the other?

Suddenly a municipal van drove into the compound, as if in answer to my thoughts, and went behind the crematorium. I ran towards it, with scarcely a word to my wife. I could not ofcourse see the body for myself, but I was glad to find that my guess was right. A Khaki-clad man told me before I could ask the question—*Lawaris*!

The van sped away, the stench went up in due course, and I studied the expression on my wife's face. Now I really felt sorry for her. Yet I couldn't resist provoking her a little more, for the last time. Said, it seems the thing

will be further delayed, there are a few more *Lawaris* to come, and only then..

The way she looked at me, I did not have the heart to cause her any more distress. She was totally confounded, if not beaten.



I could not bear to see her suffer so, and wished I could save her from the predicament. And suddenly an idea occurred to me. I said, — "Listen, the last *Lawaris* has been burnt just now. The ashes should be all there".

I did not dare a pause and went on to say "All ashes are the same. The body gives way to ashes. So what I suggest is.."

I did not have to elaborate. My wife is an intelligent woman and she could get the general idea. But she had that devastated look on her, as if she could not but agree with me — that yes, all ashes were true and the same..

I could have duly explained if she had come out with a protest. That, look, don't think we would be committing a sin, playing a mean trick on her old mother. Truly speaking, it is all the same, Marilyn and Lawaris, .. there is no separate smell to the ashes, - don't you see? Etc. But she did not allow me to explain and dragged me forward towards the crematorium. Did not speak a word, not even the gesture of a nod or something.

She opened her mouth only when we had reached the place. Told me that she had given Marilyn a golden ring to wear. One of my own rings. Had asked her to have it hallowed by her prayers and holy mantras and return it to her. So that it could protect me against all evil forces in the world. And, in particular, some crisis in my life foretold by the stars (that is by an astrologer she had met) could be well and truly averted.

Now what could I say to it? That let us wait, in that case, for Marilyn, for our own share of the goods? A little for the mother and a little for myself? I am not that selfish, am I? Anyway my wife should have let me know that she loved me so, and given me an inkling of what they were whispering to each other.

No, she should not have been that desperate. I have never said that all love is a matter of ashes too.

THE MEANING OF MONSOON

A short-short-story written originally in English published in a special edition of "Indian Literature" (No.123, Jan-Feb 1988) issued exclusively for such stories.

Delhi was exasperating during those days in the monsoon season of the year of our Freedom Forty, when I was visiting one of my married daughters over there. For the monsoon never came. Worse, it reneged on its promise day after day, with clouds that gathered in wondrous awe, but chose to disperse in due course like gentlemen without a cause.

And so on the umpteenth day of sweating it out, I decided that enough was enough. The season must be coerced to deliver, or else.

They laughed at me when I flourished an umbrella against the rains that could come any time. But I had my reasons. Reasons not necessarily physical or even symbolic, but owing to the powers of the mind. Wishes must be willed. And then it was bound to happen.

Now, what is an happening?—You may like to ask. There could be several answers, clever and profound, but I would opt for the simplest: It is the thing that says no to the sameness of life, call it boredom or heavenly bliss. It is a discontinuity, a dissociation..that does not disrupt but enhance life. Don't you agree?

But how does one dissociate? How to queer the pitch of my predictable days and nights with the all-too-familiar bosses, colleagues, helpers, the other sex, children, dogs, cats, etcetera? Don't I know the dreary routine of loves and hates that go round and round between us signifying nothing but the holy smoke of 'live and let live'? In other words, could I, by your leave, take a hand and unhinge the system, just a wee bit (I am not talking of murder, divorce and the like, which are beyond my powers) to cause a minor ecstasy? Somehow I thought it was time I did..before I became too old for anything.

Anyway, the least I could do was to take out an umbrella and provoke the monsoon. And if the living present did not help me with an happening, I could perhaps call upon the non-living past or the future to do me a favour. Couldn't I?

Such were my prayers and they were answered. Though, ironically, I had forgotten to take out the umbrella on that memorable day!

Thus a woman from my past did suddenly appear before me, when umbrella-less I was moving along the footpath of a colony in South Delhi, ostensibly in search of a shop that would sell me sweets made of *paneer*, a forbidden fruit of the Delhi summer. But please don't jump to conclusions.

The woman referred to is a girl of eight who was my playmate many many years ago, when I had come to Delhi to spend the Puja holidays with my businessman uncle, long dead and gone. She was dark, lanky and clever, the type one does not fall in love with as a boy. Nevertheless she had pleased me for one all-important reason. She had asked me once while we were swinging on the *jhoola* (or rather she was swinging with her feet pointing menacingly at me), "Will you marry me?" And I had said, Yes. At which she had smiled and said, "How nice!" Such a beautiful exchange, I must confess, has not recurred in my life, nor ever will, now that I am slithering, slowly but inevitably, from middle age to decadence. No one has ever trusted me with his or her precious goods, not to speak of a woman offering her entire life to me. So is it any wonder that I should recall those words with a bout of pleasure extraordinary, when I read 'PARMINDER SINGH' on the name-plate of a house and, added to it, a dark, clever-looking, but corpulent woman leaning over the gates?

Her name was Gulshan, Gullu for short, daughter of Parminder Singh, closest neighbour of my uncle. And I decided that this must be she. I looked at her, and she looked back at me. Our mutual gaze, probing and intense, gathered a certain momentum that could not be rolled back. And so I advanced. "Come in," she said, and opened the gates. It was as simple as that.

She took me inside the house, past the drawing room to a cubicle at the rear, reeking of tobacco and perfume. We sat facing each other across a table, when she smiled quite a broad benevolent smile and asked, "You have got them with you, no?"

"Of course, yes," I said with alacrity. For I could not possibly disappoint her. I had to honour the trust, she had placed in me. It did not matter if the goods were contraband drugs, stolen letters, or foolish memories of a childhood.

"How nice!"

The response was devastating. It had happened, and I had on the day of Shravan, caused it to happen. The words were the same, and uttered by a woman in grateful acknowledgement of what I had done for her.

She soon realized that it was all a mistake. But she did not throw me out. On the other hand, she sat demurely through my incoherences.

Before the monsoon closed in on me, I said I had to go, for I hadn't brought my umbrella. I didn't wait for her goodbyes. And imagine how I exulted over the lashing and splashing and gulping and gurgling, and what have you, on my way home!

The monsoon is vulnerable too, if not human. It cannot hold out against my kind for too long.

14 COOING OF THE CUCKOO

The Oriya original "Kala Koili" is included in the author's 5th collection "Thakura Ghara".

The English version is a translation made by the author and has not been published so far.

Jagannath Babu could hear the cooing of the cuckoo. But that did not help to relieve his distress. Rather he was peeved. As if it was teasing him, this elusive bird, black as sin!

Perhaps it was in league with Jadu Naik, he thought in acid amusement.. Not a simple fellow, this Jadu Naik; his arts and artifices would baffle the gods. Indira has warned me about him. Repeatedly. But the thing is, I am a different type of person. Out of my depth when it comes to material calculations. (Looking at his wrist watch) I wonder why Bishu has not turned up yet. Could he have gone straight to Jadu Naik's place for a confidential talk or something? You never know. Bishu is so unlike me. We are born of the same parents, but there is a world of difference between us. *Bapa* knew about it, knew it pretty well.

Jagannath Babu raised his bulk in slow motion from an ancient easy chair. With a view to do something. But there was really nothing to do right now, he realised. Still two more hours to go for the scheduled meeting. So he was obliged to hear the cuckoo over again, and acknowledged ruefully, that this was the ground reality of his ancestral home—the enveloping mass of trees, plants, birds, animals, and what have you.

"Hey Dama, bring me another cup of tea—will you?"

Dama, son of the old retainer, kept standing at the threshold, and grinned sheepishly.

"Sir, about the milk.."

"What about it?"

"Sir, Dhali, Shankar and Narangi are yielding no milk anymore. I had brought some for you from Radhudada's place, but it is all finished."

Maybe the milch-cows had little in common with cuckoos, but for Jagannath Babu it was a reminder of the nuisance. That this place was infested with a little too many of these creatures. I should have listened to the advice of Indira, he thought, and brought a tin of milk-powder with me. Anyway the tribe of Dhali, Narangi, Shankari, and such others have to

be taken off from my share, he decided. Any substitute for the animal wealth will do. Jagannath Babu closed his eyes and imagined dream-like, that his legitimate share of the paternal property had been resolved into an elegant packet of papers and documents that fitted neatly into his brief-case. No mess there, and headaches. But.. one does not really know how things will shape, these extraneous things of life.. and that's a pity..

He fell asleep in due course. No college for him now, no Indira with her kindred chatter, no hooting of the siren at the stroke of nine, no tea to induce a second visit to the toilet.. so what else could be possibly do?

However, many and various birds, including the redoubtable cuckoo, were hardly troubled by the sorrows of Jagannath Babu, and went on singing their songs usual to springtime in this village named Rangani. Their voices became more clear and confident as the day advanced, for while the daylight grew they had to little to fear from the glare of the sun. This has been their good fortune, since when the mango-grove of Manu Mohanti, the fruit-orchard of Sadanand Kanungo, the array of coconut palms that did Michhu Misra proud, besides many other trees and plants nurtured with loving care, had begun to spread themselves well enough to keep the sun at bay. When they cocked a snook at the sun, one would imagine, to claim that the sweetness of life belonged to the earth, and not the vacancies of the sky. Worse, it could perhaps be said that they had been provoking the youngsters of the village to indulge in a little too much of romance. In jest or earnest, as the case may be.

Manu Mohanti had left for his heavenly abode on the day following Diwali, last year, after seeing through seventy-seven springs. There were no near relatives around him when he died. His dear wife had preceded him by quite a few years. The elder son Jagannath Babu taught History in a college in the Capital. He could not afford to come for the funeral rites, as he was caught badly in the rush to submit valued answer-scripts by the due date. The younger son Biswanath Babu was a head clerk in the head-quarters office of the Irrigation Department. He couldn't make it either, as he had to prepare some briefs urgently for the honourable minister. And the widowed daughter was living in an unknown address. So the only persons who were at this death bed, and later at the funeral, were his old retainer Bharat (he had almost lost his eye-sight), his truant son Dama, and a few neighbours.

Manu Mohanti had expected that it would happen this way. Yet he had not agreed to go to some foreign land and stay with any of his sons. Elderly well-wishers had advised him—"Look Mohanti, you have grown pretty old, you can't even move about properly. So why do you stick to this hole? You think this will fetch you a packet of virtue—do you? (ha!)".

Manu Mohanti would answer them with a ringing laughter that involved his entire hairy, hefty, and broad-shouldered frame, and say, "Indeed I have erred. Have fallen in love with my village Rangani from top to toe. But tell me, could I possibly leave her at this old age?"

Manu Mohanti would sometimes lean back on his own special easy chair (the one on which Jagannath Babu was snoring away his ennui right now), and close his eyes. His lips would then get playful with numerous gestures that only lips were capable of. As if they had been released from the workaday world and were engaged in a spree of making love to something or somebody. . may be a delectable bit of his own life-in-Rangani that belonged to him, and no other.

No wonder he had shouted at that 'dolt of a Dama' in the recent past before his death, when he broke into the master's reverie to announce the arrival of a letter. Even though it was from one of his sons. For the sons, after all, were always there, and could be summoned if necessary, whereas these dreams were so elusive.. and sensitive..

"Get up sir, get up now, the junior master has come!" The irrepressible Dama did not hesitate now to wake up Jagannath Babu. Jagannath Babu looked at the newcomer Bishu with bleary eyes, acknowledged his hurried greetings, but could not understand why he was all smiles. Then he heard him saying.

"I started at 3 O' clock in the night. Came in the S.D.O's Jeep because he wanted to have a spot of shooting. I didn't know you get such nice game-birds on this route. S.D.O. Sahib has given me three partridges. I have asked Dama to cook them for us.. How long have you been waiting for me?"

Jagannath Babu got the message.. Bishu wants it to be known that his elder brother is a lazy lout, hardly competent to shoulder the burdens of a patrimony. Look, how he is still sleeping at 10 O'Clock in the morning, while I have been sweating it out to gather food for the family—you can see the fat partridges I have got!.. Jagannath Babu pursed his lips in a derisive smile. Yes, I know—he told him inwardly—you are the smart son of our father. You can even get a vulture killed, and serve it neat, if it suits your ends.

The two brothers sat looking at each other vacuously. For quite some time. As if their new-found stature was troubling them in a shrine vacated by the deity. Seemed he would suddenly appear from nowhere, thumping his walking-staff on the floor and ask—"Hello, when did you come? How's Indu? How's Minu? I'll have some fish caught for you from our pond. Have already told the fisherman fellow". Some such small talk and

then he would go back to his weighty books and papers..Like we were still his kids, and had come home only to have our fill of rice and fish!

We are his respectable middle-aged sons. Inheritors. Father is no more. And we haven't come here to eat rice and fish. Haven't come here merely to get closer to his lonely splendour, and then slink away. Father is no more. No more. We are overwhelmed by the loss, no doubt about it (ofcourse I don't know about *bhai*.. Bishu has little sentiment though), but we have to do our duty.. Thus they exhorted their rational selves to take charge of the situation. Biswanath Babu was the first to begin.

"When do we start *bhai*?"

"Eleven O' Clock. That's the time fixed by Jadu Naik. Haven't you met him?"

"How could I? Didn't I tell you I came here straight.."

Jagannath Babu was not really asking for facts. So he cut him short and changed the subject.

"Now let me tell you, there is no chance of getting a cup of tea in this house."

"I don't take tea."

They could both hear the cooing of the cuckoo at this point of time. But now it was more effective with Biswanath Babu, for he was galvanized into action. As if these were sounds designed to distract him, but he was made of sterner stuff.

..The lawyer Jadu Naik, and another gentleman called Nariada' were waiting for the two brothers at the village welfare centre, (which was vacant, as usual), with a cane mattress spread out for the conference. The session began when they arrived.

Droppings of goats, stubs of smoked *biris*, and peanut shells were strewn all over the place. Enough to fill them with instant revulsion—both the sensitive soul of Jagannath Babu, and the sanitized one of Biswanath Babu. But soon enough they seemed to enjoy the gentle breeze of spring when it entered the hall tentatively, after having excited the little rivulet Panchnala, never at a loss for excitement, and frolicked with the abundant blossoms in the orchards and groves of Rangani. Even the grave importance of the subject under discussion did not affect their enjoyment. For it was soon discovered that the properties left by Manu Mohanti were no King's ransom which should cause them sleepless nights. Maybe they were disappointed, initially, and appealed silently to the two honourable gentlemen invited to concretize the wishes of the dear departed—Was it fair on the part of our famous father to have left for us only a few acres, a

bunch of trees, and an old building for a house, (no cash, no hidden gold, no nothing), after having lived for so many years? However they felt relieved in a short while. Seemed to realise that father had not thought it proper to burden them with any responsibility on his behalf, even after his death. So they could as well imagine, as of old, that they were on a picnic to the village Rangani. Well then, they thought, let the *Malay* breeze have its day. And let us try to appreciate this rural and quaintly beautiful, albeit messy atmosphere for a change. For all we know, we may not have to visit this place ever again!

.. But there was still another job to be done. It had been decided that after all the moveables and immoveables had been dealt with, the two brothers would have a look at the personal possessions left by their father, and share them suitably. So they had got to lay their hands on that kind of property too, and decide on them.

They did not relish the prospect. As if they were being asked to commit a sacrilege, and father won't like it. But they resented this childish fear, which was underscored by the darkness of the evening, when the two brothers got together again in the study- cum-bed room of their father to consider the further course of action.

Eventually they banished their fears.. Father was reputed to be a very good man. And may be he has left for us nothing but a remembrance of his goodness. So couldn't we atleast inherit a portion of that sort of asset? Are we so incompetent that we can't pick up and evaluate his personal stuff, and share it between us? Make them our own, the mass of his papers, books, pictures, photos, and all such precious abracadabra?.. That's how they braced themselves to do the work right then, and entirely by themselves. A tentative suggestion to postpone the undertaking till tomorrow morning was not pursued.

Two blazing lanterns were brought in to dispel the darkness. And the work began.

—A forty-page treatise on bee-keeping authored by father. Obviously the elder brother Jagannath Babu, teacher of history should take it; it might help him in his researches.

—A genealogical table prepared by father, and written out in his own hand, showing the migration of the family from Ghumusar to the village Rangani, and how it had flourished over ten generations. Again a subject that called for further historical research. Should be taken over by the elder brother.

Thus it appeared that all the manuscripts, books and academic note-books fell to the share of the elder brother. Biswanath Babu did not

appreciate the trend. So does it mean, he protested inwardly, that all the intellectual matter, the properties related to his mind should go to *bhai,* and I have to rejoice over his oil-stained towel, the crooked walking-stick, and the fishing net? Does *bhai* own the Kingdom, just because he is a college teacher?

Anyway all that was found in the various bookshelves, drawers and the like was gone through. Much loose paper, such as the accounts of daily expenditure, correspondence with authorities over seeds and fertilizers, etc. were discarded as being useless. Set apart and gathered into a pile, along with some old magazines and books of little practical value (which included the devotional lyrics of the poet-saint Brahmananda, and the Constitution of India) for final disposal at the end of the inventory. Meant to be burnt apparently. But there was a slight difficulty about it, going by the literal meaning of the relevant clause in the Will. For it stated that the sons were free to burn and destroy only such of his personal things which were considered by them to be valueless. Now the question was—some books and all did carry price-tags on them, but where and how could they be stored? And was the junk worth the floor-space, apart from the care necessary to preserve them? In fact Jagannath Babu thought that the way his own pile of useful papers was going up, he should better transfer half the load to the other pile. It's true, he agreed, that he was keen on research and surely he would like to cherish the memory of his father. But pray, where was the time? How did a harassed intellectual find the necessary leisure for serious work, in these times such as ours? Bishu was lucky to have escaped the dilemma, he chuckled, for he was no intellectual.

Now, let us open the black trunk under the bed, they decided. They could guess that this contained father's most intimate and personal possessions. And so they had to be handled with utmost respect and circumspection. Biswanath Babu undertook the responsibility. Jagannath Babu seated himself on a cushion on the floor, close enough to verify the truth of all that his brother had to say on each of the things.

—An ancient time-piece. Biswanath Babu agreed to take it, with little enthusiasm.

—Some old coins in a pouch — God knows why they had been kept! "You better have it Bishu (hang the research!)", Jagannath Babu said. Biswanath Babu could not refuse the offer, though he was visibly unhappy about it.

—A handkerchief with a big fat rose embroidered on it. Who could have made it? *Maa* or was it *apa*? Jagannath Babu showed some interest in the object, and so Biswanath Babu did not mind having it as a keepsake.

Nevertheless, it was evident that Biswanath Babu was getting desperate over his share of the special goods that belonged to his father, and was anxiously looking for a breakthrough. That is why he brightened up suddenly at the sight of an impressive stack of papers arranged carefully on one side of the trunk, and he pounced on it, like as if it was a life-saver, which would redeem his credentials as a lover of learning, even if he was no dried-up teacher.

A hand-written tome, entitled *Rangalata.* Rangalata who? Rangalata volume one, volume two, volume three. Father seems to have written an epic, three bound volumes, in a beautifully rounded hand. Good heavens, father has written a mighty epic in verse! So is this what he was working at, till late in the night? But why? And for whom?

The two brothers started reading it together. But it was Jagannath Babu who was pretty sure that he could understand what it was all about. That it was a labour of love. And the dearly beloved was Rangani. The land, with its variegated bounties if Nature, to which these mellifluous lines were addressed was no other than the village Rangani. Wonderful! But as he went on reading he was aware of a strange feeling of resentment growing in him for this Rangalata alias Rangani. As if his father who had studied only upto Matriculation had no business to write these lines which could pass for literature. And he could not possibly love this lady, for she was no mother to him. No 'other woman' of his father could ever be his mother..

Jagannath Babu took the first, second, and third volumes in his hand, and lifted them up in the manner of demonstrating its extra-ordinary worth. The effect on Biswanath Babu was instantaneous, and he declared, — "I'll take it *bhai.* My second son has stood first in second class Honours in Oriya."

Some citations for awards received in various agricultural exhibitions and a few other manuscripts of prose and poetry were also found among the papers. Biswanath Babu kept them for himself without a word. Meanwhile Jagannath Babu had got a little absent-minded. He was groping for the hazy outlines of an image, a piece of memory from his childhood, and he was not sure if it was a fact or fantasy.. Once in the dim past *Bapa* was sitting on this bed, and I was happily perched on his lap. He was watching the black clouds merging into each other in a gray-black sky. Suddenly he smiled on seeing somebody at the window, and put me down to go near that person. (was it a woman?) And he did not take me back on his lap. I had got angry with him on that day, and had cursed the dark ghost-like thing which had snatched my father away from me..

While he was travelling thus down the memory lane, he thought he noticed a certain find that Bishu was keeping by his side. Rather furtively. An object that did not seem like yet another piece of prose or poetry. So he roused himself to ask—

"What's that?"

The answer was late in coming. Then he was told that it was a picture. An ordinary photo, to be precise. And Biswanath Babu made it clear before he could ask for further information — "It is the photo of a lady. But not of our *Maa* or *Apa*."

Not a photo of *Maa* or *Apa*..

Jagannath Babu read much anguish in that bare statement of Bishu.. *Maa* is no more. The widowed *Apa*, our only sister is as good as dead. We, the brothers have also been living away from home. But while our memories could perhaps be gleaned from odds and ends lying in musty corners of this house, they have no place in the secret recesses of his black trunk. Whereas there is someone else in there, dearer to him..

They were impelled to hold the photo straight, and have a closer look at it. A young unknown woman was leaning against a tree and was looking back at them. Sheer rapture in those eyes.

The two brothers held a conversation of sorts.. She could be a distant cousin; we won't know. May be father had kept the photo with himself to show it to prospective bridegrooms and their parents. A rural girl, but doesn't appear so,—does she? Father had been to Delhi to join an Agricultural conference, so she could well be an upcountry girl, sister or daughter of a delegate..

But they voiced different sentiments inwardly.—This indeed is Rangalata. No mere memory of a childhood, nor the infatuation of an old age, but the presiding deity of Rangani, of youth eternal.. demoness.. there is not an iota of shame of restraint in her looks. As if she is but an open and unabashed manifestation of Nature, a blossoming forth, that owes to none.. Dash it! What do I do with this one? *Bhai*, you better take it for yourself, you may find it useful in recounting the life-history of our father to your family audience.. I won't have it, thanks. Indira cannot stand the slightest deviation from moral standards. Rather you should take it, Bishu. It may perhaps help your son, a student of literature, to have some new insights into the thing called love.. God! Did our father have to leave such an awful treasure for us? Couldn't he have carried it with him to wherever he has gone?

It goes without saying that they could read the thoughts of each other. And so they put Rangalata to flames.

They burnt her to ashes. With regrets. However they felt that the anguish of having failed in their duty to light the funeral pyre of their father had been removed. They couldn't be blamed any more as being the outsider and unworthy sons of Manu Mohanti.

15 THE MOVING TRAIN

The Oriya original "Chalanta Gadi" is included in the author's 5th collection "Thakura Ghara".

A Hindi version of the story, translated from the Oriya original has appeared in "Bhasa", journal of the Central Hindi Directorate in their Children's Special Number, 1979.

The train moves on. . on and on. .



If you ask me the thing has no head nor bottom, but goes ahead nonetheless, bellowing like a fool. Like as if it is a man! My kid brother Kuna was scared stiff. Thought it is a monster. I wonder if I thought that way when I was a child.

Now suppose it has really a head and a body, it drinks water and smokes, gobbles up the black lumps of coal, and belches too — then what? Then perhaps it can talk to everybody. Would ask me, "How do you do Monja *apa*? Going home with your Papa? Your school is closed for the holidays, no?" And I would say, "Yes. One must go home on holidays. Besides, didn't you know that my uncle, the younger one, is getting married?" It will start whistling in joy, at the news of a wedding. Loud enough to split your ear-drums. Papa would get annoyed. And say. . well, what can he say, after all? The train is even mightier than Papa. The poor man would be helpless.

Then it would go to somebody else, and then to another. Would take rest from time to time. But the pig must eat again. And run off in a while, like as if it is caught napping. And say, "Good heavens, is it that late? I have to reach there by seven in the evening. Or I have to give some explanation to the station master."

It would be great fun. If the machines turn into men. . .

Then the machine wouldn't crush anyone. It would stop instantly if somebody puts his finger into it, and say, "I am sorry". No one would get crushed under its wheels.

The worms get crushed.. well, what could I do about it? I didn't do it knowingly, did I? Papa shouted at me, that I was getting late. And Mama too, that I had yet to arrange my things. So how could I guess that that wretched worm was lying on my way? On its back, poor thing, and writhing in pain? I squashed it. I mean, my shoes did. Splosh! My God! I saw it only then. Saw the spot of dark blood on the foot. And how it was still dangling a leg. Dangling, and getting dead.

I cried. That annoyed Mama, and she said I was a big show-off.

But that is how the worms die. No fault of Manju.

I am feeling so happy today, right from the beginning. May be the worm died. But does it mean that I shouldn't be happy? I have been looking forward to this day. The train moves—chug. . chug. . chug.. passing so many trees, hills, mounds, creeks and canals in the twinkling of an eye. Little children smile and wave at us, and then recede. Look, a big man over there, black and uncouth, makes faces at us. But the train refuses to stop anywhere. Couldn't care less if someone smiles or sobs, waves or makes faces!

. . I am a train. Why should the train turn into a man? I may turn into a train. That'll be more fun. I have no eyes nor ears I would say, so don't blame me if you get hurt. I would say bye-bye, and pass them by, all those

men and things to my right and left. I don't care if somebody laughs or cries, dies or lives on!

I feel like getting taller and bigger.

Seems like I am a king, sword in one hand and sniffing a rose on the other.

. .A pain in my chest. I am getting breathless.

Dash it! I am not a train really. I don't have to go on and on, no eyes nor ears—have I? Ah, why doesn't this train stop for a while? I am Manju. Don't you know I want to buy and eat some goodies when it stops at a station? I say, I hate to rush like this. I say..

(But the train took a pretty long time to slow down. Meanwhile Manju got drowsy and fell asleep on the vacant berth, half- reclining)

.. Eh .. what's that? A station, is it? Wait a second, I am getting up.

Fine! Papa has brought some hot *samosas* . . I had slept off. Perhaps I would have kept sleeping till the very end, if Papa wouldn't have woken me up. Shame! I was not merely sleeping, I was dreaming too. A scary dream. Let me recall it . . Yes, I saw Gunpussy had come. I was stroking her, but she slipped away. Fled. And then the train rushed at her. I put up my hands, and shouted and stamped my feet. Asked the train to stop. Others laughed. But I didn't care. Shouted more and more. But the train . .the train didn't stop. Came down on Gunpussy, roaring and smoking like mad. Stupid! Rascal! The train laughed. And the others laughed with him. Louder than before. The train said— "Look, how can I help it? I have no eyes nor ears, didn't you know?" Teased me. I stretched my hands to get hold of Gunpussy. But no use. Gunpussy!! No, Gunpussy didn't die. Gunpussy shall not die, Impossible! Is the train a God or something that it can kill as it likes?

Rajubhai had written that Gunpussy's body was covered with sores, that nobody took care of her, and she was pining for me. Had written that she might die. But tell me, what does Rajubhai know? Does he ever hold her in his hands? Fondle her? Gunpussy shall not die. Period.

No one can harm her, as long as Manju is alive—No train, nor God, nor anybody!

A bunch of men are getting into our compartment. Where are they coming from? Father and daughter, we were by ourselves far so long. I thought it would be like this all the way. Papa would be reading a book, and I wood be talking to myself. God knows who they are, but they haven't brought a single child with them.

That moustachioed fellow, is he a friend of my Papa? How come I had not seen him before? Potbellied falso. How could he be a friend of my Papa?

They are hugging each other. Talking about something at the same time. And laughing. The moustachioed one is offering a cigarette to Papa. Huh! Our Pape doesn't smoke.

(The train started to move again)

OK. Let them talk as they like. I will keep on looking outside. Shall never again go to sleep till I reach home. I shall remember everything that the train passes by. Note them down. One by one.

See how I do it —

One — Headless trunk of a palm-tree.

Two — Five red lilies.

Three — Man fans himself with a *gamcha* that he takes out from his head.

Four — A bus is marching against our train. As if it can beat us!

Five — The hill burns. How come it is smoking if it is not burning somewhere?

Six — Worm swims through the water.

Gosh! The train runs so fast that you can't keep track of all the things. When you look at the worm swimming, you miss what that girl was doing on the river-bank. Is it proper to note the worm and forget the girl? Now, so many things must have fled in the meantime. So many kinds of flowers, odd and crooked trees, jagged mounds . . they have committed no sin, have they? Even those tiny little blades of grass, if you ask me, each and every one of them—Why should they be ignored? Who says that this tall tree must be noted, and that teeny-weeny grass be left out? That this black lambkin be noted, and that white cow be ignored?

The train rushes on. That's his nature. But does it mean that whatever catches my eye is true, and the rest is false?

No. Manju is not one to cheat, put anything aside. Won't I get angry if they forget me, because I am a kid?

But the trouble is—how can I help it? I am but a single child, and these moments are running so very fast. .

Shadows are coming along nice. Good, I like the shadows. They bring down the heat. We sit on the low wall every evening, Meena and I. We keep silent, but it seems like we are talking to, and touching each other inside of us. We see boys shouting in the field. It's irritating. The boys are so uncouth!

Nothing ever gets lost in the shadows. But none stands out either and stares at you. They get doser, but don't merge. They grow beautiful. Alike.

Ah, the shadows are getting so thick, by and by. . It's going to be dark or what? No no— I don't like the dark. I get scared. Everything is lost when the dark takes over. You sleep and then it's all g-o-n-e. Better to keep awake with your eyes lowered, watch each other in silence and talk to each other with your lips closed. . get close together and alike . .

"What! I had seen him the other day, you know!"

The grown-ups talk so loud. And they say they get a headache when we children raise our voice a little bit. But why did Papa get startled like that? Did that moustachioed fellow tell him something? No matter, I am not bothered. I will start counting again, and note them.

Begin counting again? But why now? They all look alike in the shadows beautiful. Like as if it is but one picture painted in soft greens, grays, and the colour of water. Lovingly together with lowered eyes. Like me and Meena. Where do you have the grass now, or the trees? They are all a streak of green. And where are the birds or the men? Stray dashes of black, that's what they are. So why should one come to the fore? And another feel hurt? ·

"Oh, he was a hefty young man, I must say. I have been warning him for a long time. . the damned fellow courted his own death"

Whom are they talking about? Why is Papa getting so worked up?

"Who died, Papa?"

"Panua, carpenter. You don't know him."

"Panua the carpenter died. What is he to Papa? Anyway why does Papa scold him like that?

He shouldn't have scolded him. They are all small and the same. To live does not mean that somebody goes up in the sky. And to die does not mean that he comes down on the earth. No one goes up nor comes down in the shadows. They lie together under the covers, cuddling and cooing to each other. The train goes roaring by, but it hardly matters to them. Suppose Panua has turned into a blade of grass or a bird coming out of water fluttering its wings. So what's wrong if he has chosen to die?

But the shadows are leaving. . the dark is moving in . . how does it bother God if it is shadows and shadows all the time? Oh dear, all the colours will get smudged in a moment, and then it will be black all over. Panua will indeed die, and get squashed and rubbed off—like that worm.

It all started with the worm. Everything would have gone off smoothly, but for that worm who died. The moustachioed fellow wouldn't have

appeared and told us about the death of Panua. And the shadows wouldn't have been followed by the dark.

No, I won't look any more through the window. Rather I will think about the wedding of my uncle. Does she look like my Mama, the one he is going to marry? I think I will go and bow down to her, and say—my name is Manju. Then she will pull me to her . . oh no! I will die of shame. .

(Dark clouds broke into rain and the train slowed down to halt at a Rly Junction.)

This is a big station. The train is going to be here for a long time it seems. And lots of people will come crowding in. .

My, what a racket they are making over there!

Did Papa again say 'What'? or am I getting muddled? Yes, he and his friend are getting off in a hurry, not caring for the rains, and others are following them. What's happened?

And some others are rushing in. Where has Papa gone? Am I going to sit here alone? Let him come, I shall. . there, he has come back, and is telling others with his eyes wide open in wonder, "I have checked. He passed away just two to three hours back. No previous signs. Sudden heart-failure." And a youngman, hands in his pockets—looks so much like my uncle—lets off English words from time to time. Just a few words starting with "I know, I know. .". And nods his head. What's happened? But I can't ask Papa, he is hardly ever looking at me. Even if I ask him, he would say— "You won't know. You won't understand".

I see. The President has died. Which President?

When I ask Papa he says, angrily it seems, "Our President. The President of India, Doctor Zakir Husain".

Why is Papa getting angry? Very well, I won't ask him anything ever. But how did this happen anyway? No previous signs, and yet he died? Strange!

What happened now? The President of India, no less. Not Panua, not any ordinary fellow. So will the train run? Will the wedding take place?

They are chattering away. That young man, hands in his pockets, has started delivering a lecture. Says there will be serious trouble, they will not allow Giri to be President. I know Giri is the Vice-President. Why should there be any trouble if he becomes President?

Terrible men! I started at a very wrong moment I guess. First, it was the worm then Panua and then the President of India himself. I will not come by train again. All this happened because of the train. No, no the poor train

is not at fault. He goes on doing his home-work. For him they are all the same, —the worm, Panua, and . .

I'm feeling so hungry. An odd time to feel hungry! Had I known it, I would have eaten some more *samosas* at the last station. But how could I know? How could anybody imagine that the President would die so suddenly? I can't ask Papa right now. Papa will get annoyed, and the people will laugh. That the girl has no sense. Here the President is dead, and the silly girl says she is hungry. .

Papa is laughing. Laughing his head off over something said by the moustachioed man. The rest of them are talking to each other in their respective seats. That slim fellow has brought out a book to read, looks like a story-book. This is no time to read story books! The grown-ups are really funny. They were looking so glum a little while ago, angry and upset too. And now they behave like everything is fine.

(The train started to move)

The train is moving again. That's right. Why should the train stop moving because the President is dead?

But all the fun is spoilt and gone. It's complete dark outside, and still raining. Papa asks me to put up the glasspane, the same as on the other side, so the rains won't spray me wet. Nor can I see anything outside. I can see myself though, on the glass. Can see Papa's face too, and the faces of others. How that one smiles to himself, another raises his eyebrows, dilates his nostrils, or wears a frown. But why should I see it all? Are these double images of men any more pleasing than the rains and dark outside? Besides, the images are distorted, I am sure, because the President is dead. Howsoever they may laugh, read storybooks, and do all such things. Don't I know it?

I won't listen to Papa. I will put up the glasspane, and then ring it down a little bit. I will look at the dark.

Maybe I like the shadows, and I am afraid of the dark. But it's better to look at the dark, than those double images of men, thick and close.

The dark does not bind you. Nor can anyone bind it. It may scare you in the beginning, but then you feel so light after sometime—no? You can't see a thing, but you can draw on it all sorts of pictures. Just as you please. You can draw and erase figures at will, of those who are dead and those who will be dying. Like as if it is a slate! See how I draw the figure of the President and then rub it off. I don't know this Panua or I could have drawn him too. And as for that worm. . oh no, the worms don't have a figure really.

So I say, Manju does not fear the dark. Manju is not afraid of death. I am no grown-up that I will get startled and upset and sit quickly with an odd look on the face.

Am I still felling hungry? I don't think so.

Let me sing a song, toss it into the darkness. The people in the compartment can't hear it, but only the non-people of the dark. Magic!

But suppose, as I do so, the living ones can't hear me any more! And only the beings of the dark surround me and ask—" Won't you sing a song for us, Manju apa?" And those non-people stretch their hands, long as they are, to pull me towards them?

No-no-I won't get into that awkward situation. I am the daughter of my Papa and Mama. I am not scared, that's a fact, but what have I got to do with them?

(Manju raised the glasspane. And did not lower it again till the train reached the station of her home-town. And then through the open window. .)

Lights! The station! And here is home!

My! Such lights at our station! Seems they will drive all the darkness away!

Who has come to the station? Grandpa couldn't have come. Rajubhai had written that he was not keeping well. So maybe grandma would be there. And auntie. And Ragubhai ofcourse. Or I would teach him a lesson!

There, I can see Bhajana's face. The fellow grins, baring all his teeth. Grandma says he is a shirker, does not do his work, but is an expert at grinning. But he cares for Gunpussy. Feeds her secretly, with milk.

Rajubhai!

Look, Gunpussy has come! Rajubhai has brought her along.

(Manju got down, the moment the train stopped)

"Give her to me, she is my Gunpussy! . . But where are the sores? Nothing of the sort! She has grown fairer, more beautiful. My Gunpussy, my gun-gun-pussy!

Rajubhai whispers— 'you have heard it, no? the President. . ' And grandma is asking me something. Wait, wait; can't you all wait for a minute?

Well, they have died— the worm, Panua, and the President. But suppose they would all have lived, and not my Gunpussy.. No! No! It couldn't be so. It could never be so!

(The train started to move again in due course).

16 THE PRIZE

The Oriya original "Purashkar" is included in the author's 6th collection "Nali Gulu Gulu Sadhaba Bahu".

The English version is a translation made by the author, and has not been published so far.

"Got it?"

The question ran parallel with the process of despatching, into his mouth, a large ball of rice soaked in *Dal*. Followed by *Sag* and *Chutney*, in that order. The fish got a special and separate treatment, with his undivided attention. And then another ball of rice. Sometime in between he shouted at the cook — "Hey Ganesh! How long to go for your brinjal-fry?"

Banabasi Babu held back his answer. As though that would place the matter lying in his court and the brinjal-fry on an equal footing!

He had even begun to doubt if father remembered the question anymore. The newer dish was now on his plate. 'Underdone—damn it!', he said. The pussy-cat meanwhile, had made fast with a piece of fried fish. The grandson, fresh from the bath-tub and dripping all over, had arrived on the scene to share the supposedly delicious dishes served for grandpa. 'Couldn't somebody in this house rub him dry?' he asked the family in a mildly sarcastic vein. Whereupon the attending daughter-in-law, visibly embarrassed, started to do the job, inspite of howls of protest from the boy. And so it went.. But had the question he had put to me, just now, really got lost in this stupid din and bustle of a daily meal? Banabasi Babu pressed his lips and took a deep breath. And he wondered if he should not rather withdraw quietly, for the sake of his own good. Did anybody care, after all, for the answer? Not my father, nor the family, nor my society for that matter!—he added mockingly.

However he stopped in his tracks. It's not done. That apart, he knew his father well. He did not forget his enquiries even though he took his own time to pursue them. The question would come back. After he had gone through the post-lunch briefings on the present status of the kitchen garden, the productive profile of the cattle and the fowl, the grandson's cough, and the housewife's arthritis, and topping it all with a belch of satisfaction, and a piece of *pan*. When he would perhaps remind him, — "And yes, what about that thing? Did you get it?"

Dear father, it isn't just one of those things, a mere domestic trinket..

But it was no use blaming him. You did not expect him to change at this age. Material goods were all that mattered to him. Which, oddly enough, included his well-established son and his literature too. Thus it was most likely, thought Banabasi Babu, that he would tell his card-playing crony Nandu Babu with a certain lift in his voice — "You know what? Our Banu has got a prize for his poems. It has even come out in the 'Samaj!'". And Nandu Babu would nod his head in gracious acknowledgement of a pleasant incident in his friend's family, and would possibly add a monosyllabic 'Good!' He would hardly trouble father for further details, — the name of the poem or the book, and what it was all about.



Anyway the question was asked for the second time in due course— "You got it, no? Otherwise you will be in trouble. You may find it lost when you come home next time. You may even be told that it has been

eaten away by white ants! You never know with our people over here. Thank God, they had sent you the cheque earlier by post."

"Yes, I have got it. The Secretary was not there, and so the others were not sure if they should hand it over to me. But they relented when I said that I'll have to leave for Delhi tomorrow, to resume my official duties after leave, which means the Prize will be left lying over here, and I have to tell everybody that it was not given to me, even though I had appeared personally." Fact is, none of these fellows in the S.S.S., from the Joint Secretary downwards to the lowliest messenger could recognise me. Worse, there was not the faintest glimmer of understanding on their faces, even when I introduced myself as the author of "Champak and the Cheetah". But no use telling all this to father. History will know me, the intrepid poet Banabasi Samantray, who ushered in the New Age in Oriya Poetry.. Such were the thoughts of Banabasi Babu surrounding the information he gave his father.

"Fine, you have done the right thing. You can never trust these people.. Now, may I see it?"

Banabasi Babu went upstairs and lifted the thing lying on the top of an almirah in his bedroom. And carried it in his arms, carefully, down the steps. It was the Prize, secure in an oblong frame of glass & cardboard, panelled in wood. The casual manner in which he passed it on to his father could hardly conceal the glow on his cherubic face of forty years, when he found the old gentleman peering intently at the printed words.

Father went on reading. Articulating every word in a slow and measured tone:

"Sri Saraswati Samaj
(The oldest cultural institution of Orissa).

The collection of poems entitled "Champak and the Cheetah" written by Sri Banabasi Samantray, and published in 1975 has been considered to be a work of superior merit, and so the Samaj is pleased to honour the author of the book with this citation, along with a cheque of Rupees one thousand, as a token of its appreciation.

Signed - Jayadev Rath
Secretary."

Even after reading it through he repeated some of the words to himself, framing them with his lips, and stressing the syllables in an audible whisper.

'Of superior merit.. a cheque of Rupees one thousand..'

Dash it! What is so wonderful about these words? Banabasi Babu was peeved. The oldest cultural institution has thought fit to bestow a prize of one thousand rupees on a poet who has been writing poems of extraordinary power and passion.. wasting no words to spell out the 'superior merit'.. no frills, no nothing.. well, what else did you expect from such an ancient and prestigious body?

But my father is overwhelmed by the words, or so it seems. One would ever imagine that he is getting into a state of ecstasy, goose pimples and all. Absurd!

Banabasi Babu could not possibly ask his father to cut it out. However he did ask him somewhat curtly, when he had hardly finished with his renewed reading—

"Should I hang it in the drawing room?"

"No. You should better take it with you. This is your very own. It'll be wrong to leave it in the charge of anybody else."

Banabasi Baby was taken, initially, by surprise, and reacted with a cynical half-smile. That's a new theory my father has evolved, he said to himself. But when he looked at the old man's face, he sensed a certain intimacy between the two of them over this thing, known as the Prize.. He is my father. He understands.

He understands. No excess of colour there, on his face. But an unmistakable shade of empathy that comes from deep within his psyche, and makes it look so sad and solemn. As if he too had written a few lines of poetry in his young days. Lines he had seized upon when he woke up from a dream, but could not complete in the day-light hours. Lines that got lost in his work-a-day world, leaving the residue of an yearning that had lain dormant in his heart all these years. And now he remembers, and tells me, — this is your very own, my dear son. Not a mere oblong frame and a few printed words. Not a piece of property like any other, but the endorsement of a flame that had burnt within you, and had tortured you so. Don't I know it?

Is that so? The sufferings of my being when I had entered into the agape and expressed mouth of the cheetah, sufferings that had suffused in an enveloping and maddening smell of the *champak* flower, how I hated and enjoyed it all, ever unfulfilled but moving towards the elusive lotus in the pond, the Prize supreme.. did such feelings really trouble my father in some creative moments of his mornings and evenings? Well, why not? He is my father, after all..

There had been quite a few comments on these poems by well-known critics. That it was a terminal philosophy of sex. Some even found in them a spiritual experience in fear, like when Mother Yashoda had looked into the gaping mouth of her baby Krishna. But could anybody feel the searing albeit joyous pain that informed my metaphors? The torture of the senses and beyond, that got moulded into my sensuous lines, so-called? They couldn't have, can never ever hope to have, try as they might for years and years. My father too won't understand a word of my poems. But he knows the author of the poems in his blood. That is why he tells me to take it away with me. For it is my very own. A token of the intimate non-realisation, the glorious headache that belongs to me and no other. A recognition of my intenser self..

The father went back. But Banabasi Babu remained standing over there, with the Prize clutched in his hands.

"Hey, what is wrong with you? What makes you stand there, rooted to the earth, like a Yogi? And hug it close, like nobody's business?" — Wife Neera made the snide remark, pushing back her veil (now that the father-in-law had left the scene), with a short burst of laughter to follow. But instantly her mood changed to one of injured pride, being the poet's wife, no less. "Prize, indeed!", she said, "A few words of praise flung at you after so many years of hard work, and a paltry one thousand! No thanks, I would have said, if I were you.. Well, put it back somewhere for God's sake, and come to eat. I have lots of work to do"!

Banabasi Babu felt that he should rather have stood right under the sun, in the centre of the courtyard. It would have been more statuesque that way, and in tune with the elements!

Anyway, he relaxed his hold on the oblong frame, and addressed his wife, "You know, I am going to take this with me. But the question is how.."

"What? Are you mad? From here to Howrah, and then by chair-car to Delhi, where you have hardly any space to stretch your legs?"

"We'll see about it."

Neera did not prolong the debate. She knew when to withdraw. How to give a long rope to the hang-up of a poetic soul, and then to kill it gently, at the opportune moment. She left for the kitchen.

Paru, his son aged four, Neeta, his brother's daughter studying in the Junior High, and her friend Kanak gathered round him, and wanted to have a look at the Prize. Banabasi Babu released it, in a sudden generous gesture, to the young enthusiasts. And he did not seem to mind the way they were pulling at it from all sides, and each was trying to outdo the

others in mouthing the words. Here atleast, he noted, was a certain appreciation of the event, howsoever playful and un-informed it may be. Far removed from the wise indifference of my adult friends and relatives, — brother Kshetrabasi, engineer, his bejewelled wife, my younger sister Madhuri parading her undergraduate Psychology, elder sister Latika & her suave husband working in the State Secretariat, and a host of other members of my hometown elite, who have been made to know about this Prize business. They had not failed to compliment me, but had little else to say. Except may be, that the one thousand could have been more. Philistines, one and all! No better than the older generation Nandu Babu & his kind. One of them, an honest fellow I must say, had the temerity to ask- "Excuse me, but I don't get it really. What could be the connection between a cheetah and the champak"?

Forget it! It is my very own, as my father had said. I don't care about the others..

But he could not ignore Neera. His wife, life-partner. She must know, she must understand, she must at least feel the feelings of her poet-husband, he went on repeating to himself, even as they came together that night in the intimacy of their bedroom, and he planted a prolonged kiss on her, at the conclusion of a satisfying mating. He dismissed the thought that this was no time to talk about the Prize, howsoever literary it may be. For doesn't it refer after all, he asked, to intimacies such as these, emotions recollected in tranquillity, or in turbulence for that matter? So he was about to broach the subject again, starting with the mode and manner of transporting the object under consideration, when Neera seemed to divine his thoughts, and announced,

"I have kept it away, safe and secure."

"Kept what?"

"That one. . the Prize. By the side of my wedding sari, my jewellery, and your love letters. Because it is no less precious. It will remain there, inside the chamber, you know where, for, all time to come. Any objections?

Banabasi Babu was overwhelmed. He felt that Neera had indeed provided the response, even before the question was posed. A response in abundant love. How could I misjudge her so?,—he wondered, and sought to nestle against her breasts. Neera was satisfied; she had won.

But Banabasi Babu felt restless after some time, as he began to realize the enormity of the decision. It shall remain there, she had said. That is, in that dark and secret chamber down under the floor of this ancestral house. Well beyond the reach of burglars.. and of human eyes too!

..Stowed away. Forgotten. Placed under a hallowed shroud, and banished from public view. Like as if it stands condemned.. for life!

After these many years a message from the outer world—'you are not alone, Banabasi Babu, we are with you in your travails, we understand you, may be a little bit'. But that too is lost to me now. Nowhere near to inspire me, as I struggle with my new lines. Not even the mental image of its living presence on the wall or mantelpiece of my home, far-off as it may be.

So after a while, he began timidly.

"You know, Ira and Dhira couldn't come with us because of their exams. They would have liked to see it.."

"So what? Won't your children be coming home again during their holidays? And couldn't it be brought out then for their benefit?"

Banabasi Babu couldn't think of any other plausible excuse. So, damn it, he said, and laid himself bare—

"I won't feel happy without it.."

Neera gave him a strange look, like as if her husband was feigning to be a small boy who was being denied his latest toy. You could read into it a sense of amusement, bordering on contempt, which was perhaps not lost on Basnabasi Babu. So he couldn't but counter it by saying.

"You don't understand me Neera. It is like the little sandalwood case that stays in your vanity bag, all the time, for it contains the image of your deity.."

"My.. God! You call that one your deity!"

Neera was shocked. She didn't have words to express her feelings. Nor could she bring herself to laugh it off derisively. But the delayed response was not too unusual either. She gave up, as any sensible wife would do in the circumstances. And said,

"Very well. You may carry your deity with you. I will bring it out tomorrow morning. But, mind you, you have to hold it in your hands all the way, for it is too big and awkward to be put in any of the small suitcases we have brought, and stuffed and stuffed so they would break.

So the Prize was obliged to part company, on the following morning with the jewellery & the love-letters, and was groomed for the long journey ahead. It was wrapped up twice over in an old newspaper and bound fast in a length of twine. Banabasi Babu did not like the way it lay exposed to the vulgar gaze of all and sundry, nor the inane, albeit inevitable questions and answers which were thrown about to explain the status of this unique piece of luggage — why it could not be carried in a

suitcase, how important it was supposed to be, whether the young master (that was from the old retainer Raghu) was not the only person in Orissa to have received this honour, etc. But he had to suffer it through; any comments from him could perhaps have been disastrous. At one time, ofcourse he had blamed the S.S.S. for their incompetence, that they should have made the thing somewhat handy & elegant, but he chided himself to say that temples are shaped, after all, by the will of the deity.

The deity-motif dogged him, inspite of himself, even when he was on the overnight Puri-Howrah Express. For though the Prize could be neatly tucked away under the seat, cushioned between a sack of parched rice and a gunny-bag of odds and ends, he was troubled by the fact that it was lying at his feet.. Not a proper place for deities. He was happy, though, that thoughts were neither audible nor visible, and so Neera won't have an inkling of what was passing through his mind.

The next part of the journey was from Howrah to Delhi on the second day. By the deluxe Express in an air-conditioned chair car, in which only small pieces of luggage are allowed to be carried in the overhead racks, leaving the substantial ones for the brake-van. But the Prize with its special dimensions and a fragile temper could not possibly be placed in either. So it had to be 'adjusted' somehow in and around your seat by the leave of your fellow-passengers. Who could sometimes be so insufferably polite! Thus when a sharp little corner of the Prize got pushed into the fleshy dhoti-clad calf of a neighbour, and Banabasi Babu did offer profuse apologies at his 'Ouch!', the gentleman thought fit to add a post-script to his "Doesn't matter" by saying- "Such things should better be carried on your person, — no?"

Ofcourse it is a very personal thing, and I shall carry it on my person. There! — fumed Basnabasi Babu inwardly, as he sought alternately, but without much success, to put it by his side, hold it on his lap, and keep it pressed between his legs. However Neera came to his rescue when she noticed a silly and superior smile on the lips of the lady by her side, when the third-named experiment did not work.

How did she manage the adjustment? Was it without tears? Banabasi Babu could have easily got it verified by looking behind him, where Neera was seated. But he was not too keen to know. He assured himself that Neera knew how to take care of things. His things, no less than her own. She was not only a good housewife, there was also a large slice of trust involved.. call it love — never mind the hard words she had spoken yesterday.

Thus the minutes passed, and then the hours, on the moving train.

Banabasi Babu hummed the current popular tunes of the silver screen, smiled at the jokes offered by a rural pundit, and even took part in some loud lambasting of the Establishment. It appeared as though he was bent upon enjoying himself, as he ought to — now that a mission had been duly accomplished through the joint efforts of husband and wife.

However he got himself detached in due course from the unthinking crowd, as every creative artist was prone to. Because there was a limit to which he could 'kill' time, like others. He could not but make use of the God-given moments for a higher purpose. That is, compose new lines in his mind, even if he was not in a position to put his thoughts to pen and paper. Banabasi Babu savoured of the detachment proper to him, and started the imaginative exercise with materials from the passing scene, — the naked boy splashing gleefully in the muddy waters, the odd flower blushing unseen in the marshes, the woman in the red receding into the horizon, etc.. yet another slice of the commonplace life that awaits my artistry and reflection.. moving on to a newer life that will live on for ever.

Has Neera already gone to sleep? Anyway she would have surely made sure about the Prize. You can always depend on her..

The night did not hold any nightmares for Banabasi Babu. The next day too was free of incidents.. till the lunch arrived.

It was a minor accident, when you come to think of it, and unavoidable. The bearer was coming with a lunch-tray for Mrs. SenGupta sitting by the side of Neera. He had necessarily to get past Neera to reach his customer. But in doing so, he stumbled against a tiny-weeny bit of the Prize peeping out from under the seat. Which by itself was no disaster. But it so happened that the train lurched, a little too sharply, at that point of time, with the result that the cup slipped from the tray, and the fluid in there (it was mutton-gravy to be exact) spilled on Neera's Sari, while a drop or two trickled on to the Prize itself.

Neera yelled at the bearer, and Mrs. SenGupta got terribly upset, even as the bearer started wiping off the mess, mumbling his apologies.

There was a minute crack in the glass, in the left-hand corner, recalled Banabasi Babu. So the gravy must have found its way inside, he feared. And then he panicked in a sudden realization, as it were, of the horrid possibility, and pushed aside the bearer to take out the Prize. His worst fears were confirmed. There was quite a big blotch on the wrapping, the paper was thoroughly soaked, and so the rest could be easily imagined.

"Look!" he cried out to Neera, "Look what they have done to it!"

It took sometime for Neera to realise that her husband's rage was not the same as hers; the focus was different. And then she flared up, unmindful of Mrs. SenGupta and others staring at her—

"It has been defiled - is that it? And you have no thought for my costly Conjeevaram which has been thoroughly spoilt?"

Banabasi Babu was mortified by the charge. Yes, it is indeed shameful, I had lost my sense of proportion, he chided himself.

Contrite as he was, Banabasi Babu could perhaps have spoken the right words in a little while, and helped to defuse the situation. But Neera chose to press home her advantage. She took the Prize in her hands and drew the attention of her husband to the tell-tale spot, as he said.

"I can remove it, wholly and entirely,—you can take it from me. But can you do the same.. remove the ugly hurt, the dishonour you have brought to me as your wife?"

Banabasi Babu was flabbergasted. More than the indiscertion (thank God, she had kept her voice low), he was confounded by the sheer irrelevance of what she said, though the facts were true as they were. And pained by his total inability to explain the irrelevance to these 'other people', including his wife.

..Could I make her realise that what I have done to her, infidelity or whatever, a common failing of man and husband, has nothing to do with my poetry? that my poetry is ever and always greater than the wretch who has brought it forth? that the nasty encounter between the cheetah and the gazelle, the saliva and the blood, has, after all, been transmuted into a divine fragrance?

..Yes, it is indeed divine, I can tell you that, but you won't understand, nobody will ever understand..

In the result, Banabasi Babu remained sad and silent during the rest of the journey. So much so that Neera felt sorry for the hang-dog look (that is how it seemed to her) of her man, who was indeed an estimable person, inspite of these small lapses, and managed to say "I am sorry!" in an undertone. Though it evoked no more than a faint smile from him.

Ira and Dhira had come to receive them at the New Delhi Rly Station, along with the office people. Neera held the Prize high before her daughters, and announced with evident joy and pride.

"Behold, this is the big Prize your papa has got for his poems! But the poor man is so sad, you know, because a little bit of gravy seems to have got into it.. but we can surely wipe it clean, all of us — what do you say?"

Ira and Dheera brought out a handkerchief, and started instantly with a loving gesture of the Operation clean-up.

It took sometime for Neera to realise that her husband's rage was not the same as hers; the focus was different. And then she flared up, unmindful of Mrs. SenGupta and others staring at her—

"It has been defiled - is that it? And you have no thought for my costly Conjeevaram which has been thoroughly spoilt?"

Banabasi Babu was mortified by the charge. Yes, it is indeed shameful, I had lost my sense of proportion, he chided himself.

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